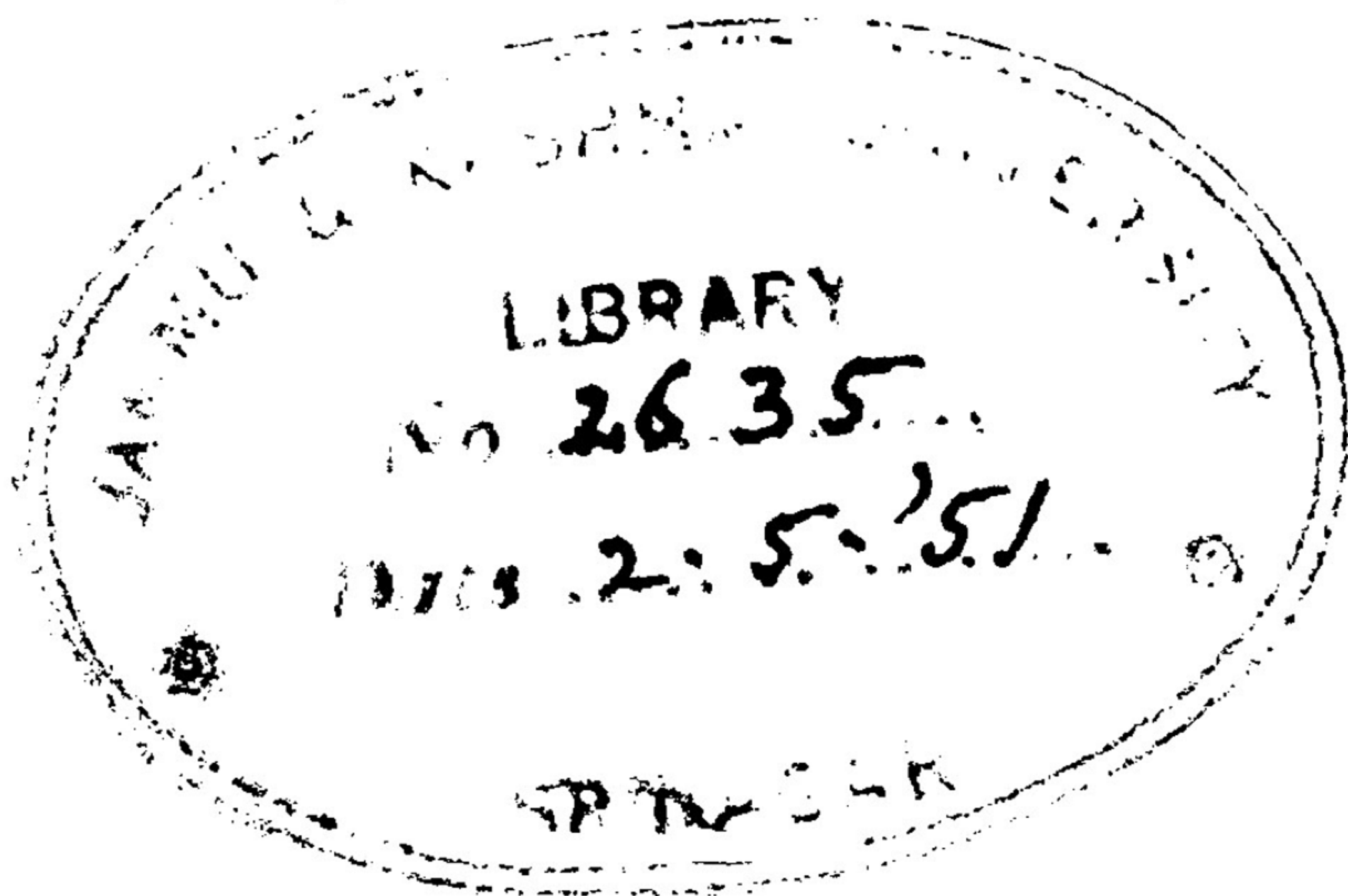


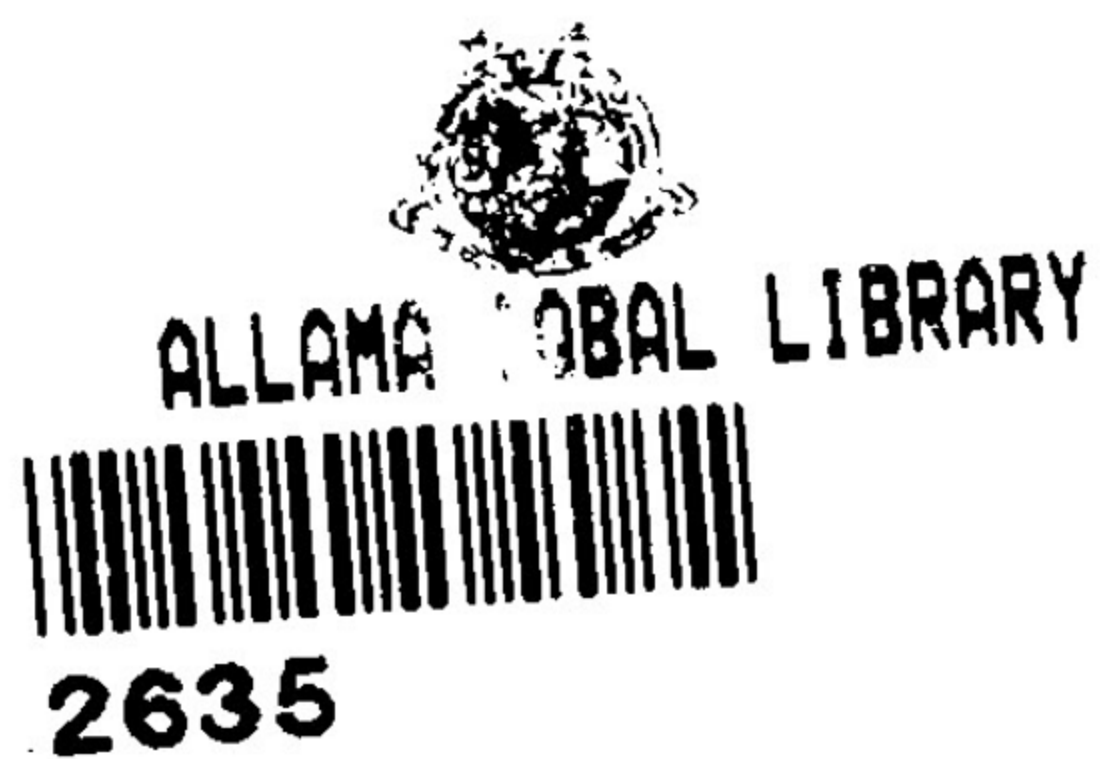
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Boris Polevoi

WE ARE SOVIET PEOPLE

STALIN PRIZE

1948

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We Are Soviet People is a book of short stories by Boris Polevoi for which he was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1948. Three stories—*The Grave of the Unknown Soldier*, *A Road of War*, *Front Line on the Eisenstrasse*—written by the author after he received the award, have been included.



BORIS POLEVOI

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BORIS POLEVOI

*We Are
Soviet People*



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ILLUSTRATIONS
BY V. S H C H E G L O V

COVER DESIGN
BY J. Y E G O R O V

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Matvei Kuzmin's Last Day

MATVEI KUZMIN had the reputation of a recluse among his fellow villagers. He lived some distance from the village, in a small tumbledown cabin standing alone on the edge of the forest. Rarely mingling with people, glum and taciturn, he loved to wander through the woods and swamps, his old-fashioned gun slung over his shoulder, his dog for a companion. In the spring when buds appeared on the trees and the wood grouse's mating call rang in the forests over the thawed patches, Kuzmin would board up his cabin, take his orphaned grandson Vasya (who lived with him), and go to the distant forest lake, where he would remain for weeks on end.

The kolkhozniks did not exactly dislike Matvei, but they did not understand him and avoided him: God only knows what was on the

mind of a man who shunned company, was sparing of words and roamed the woods, no one knew where. Besides, the hunter's lust had long since been held in contempt in the village. Nevertheless he worked as the kolkhoz watchman, and although he was in his eighties, there was not a soul in the district who dared encroach on the farm's property, guarded by grandfather Matvei and his ferocious shaggy dog, Sharik.

The calamity of war had reached the Veli-kiye Luki lake region. A ski battalion of a German mountain rifle division stationed in the district, was billeted in the Kolkhoz *Rassvet* (*Dawn*). Someone had told the battalion commander about this gloomy, unsociable, old man and he decided that Matvei was just the person for the post of village elder.

Matvei Kuzmin was summoned to the German *Kommandantur*, which was housed in the new kolkhoz administration building. He was offered a glass of German brandy and the post of the village elder. The old man thanked the officer but refused to drink on the pretext of bad health. He also turned down the post of village elder, pleading old age, deafness and other ailments.

The Germans left Kuzmin alone and even showed him the special favour of returning his

old gun, which he was to have handed in on the commandant's orders.

The Germans remembered Kuzmin in the early spring when they were rallying their forces in the lake region for an offensive. The rifle division was transferred to the front line. The ski battalion, quartered in the Kolkhoz *Rassvet*, was ordered to steal through the forests and swamps without giving battle until they reached the Soviet positions, when they were to attack the forward outposts of General Gorbunov's unit from the rear. A guide was needed who knew the forest trails well. And who could know them better than Grandfather Matvei? He had tramped these paths over and over again and knew every swamp, every pine, every stone, every one of the mysterious forest signs comprehensible only to a hunter.

The battalion commander sent for the old man. He asked Matvei to lead them in a secret night march to the rear of the Soviet positions. If he refused, he would be shot; if he carried out the order, he would be given money, flour, kerosene, and, most tempting of all, a double-barrelled hunting gun of the well-known German make, *Three Rings*.

Matvei Kuzmin stood silently before the officer, crumpling his worn sheepskin cap.

With the eye of a connoisseur he glanced at the gun, whose steel barrel shone like mother-of-pearl in the sun. The officer drummed the table impatiently with his knuckles. His fate and that of his battalion and, perhaps, the outcome of the whole operation, so carefully planned, depended on this sullen, incomprehensible man. And now, intercepting the covetous glances cast on the gun, he tried to guess the thoughts of this glum man of the woods.

"A fine gun," said Kuzmin finally, patting the barrel with his horny palm as he gave the officer a sidelong glance. "And will you throw in some money besides, sir?"

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed the officer happily and turned to the interpreter: "Tell him he's a practical man. That's good. Tell him that the German Command respects practical people, that the German Command is generous to those who serve it loyally."

The officer was jubilant. A reliable guide had been found. But there was more to it than that. In the five months he and his battalion had spent in that cold dismal forest after having been so long in sunny France, gay even in calamity, he had instinctively begun to fear these unintelligible Soviet people, this gloomy land, these uninhabited woodland tracts where

every mound, every bush, every stump might unexpectedly hide a sniper; where even in the rear, far from the front line, they had to sleep fully dressed with a cocked revolver under the pillow.

But money, money! Apparently it retained its power even here, among these strange fanatics who set their homes on fire at the sight of the advancing enemy. How enquiringly the old man looked at him, evidently trying to figure out whether or not he was being fooled about the reward!

"Tell him he will be generously paid—offer him a thousand rubles!" added the officer hastily.

The old man listened to the interpreter, gave the officer a hard look from beneath his bushy yellow-grey eyebrows and answered, after a moment's consideration:

"Not enough. You want to buy my services 'dirt cheap.'"

"Fifteen hundred; well, make it two thousand."

"Half in advance, sir."

Having talked over the matter with the interpreter, the officer carefully counted out the money. The old man gathered it up with his knotty, sinewy hand and carelessly stuck the bills inside the lining of his cap.

"All right. I'll lead you along secret paths known only to me and the wolves. Tell me exactly where you want to go."

The commander named the place and started to point it out on the map.

"I know where it is. I used to hunt foxes there. I'll get you there by morning.... Only don't fool me about the gun, sir."

The kolkhozniks saw him leave the officer's house in his usual reserved manner, not looking at anyone, smiling into his beard. He answered the whispered curses which reached his ears with a gloomy grin, and when the former kolkhoz bookkeeper, a sturdy fellow, caught up with him and threatened to set his cabin on fire for hobnobbing with the Germans, he only muttered, without even turning around:

"Go tell your mother to wipe your nose."

The kolkhozniks, watching Matvei's cabin from the distance, saw his grandson Vasya, a knapsack on his back, run down the steps a half hour later and disappear into the forest with Sharik trotting at his heels. They saw the old man bring out his wide, fur-padded hunting skis and rub them with bear's grease, glancing every once in a while at the house where the German officer lived.

Meanwhile, the Germans were preparing for the departure. The officer was sitting at his table in the lurid light of the carbide lamp, finishing a letter to his brother Wilhelm, an engineer in an optics factory in Saxony.

He wrote:

“Dear Willi,

“I began this letter more than a month ago but I can’t seem to get around to finishing it. It isn’t that I haven’t the time. In fact I have so much time that I don’t know what to do with it. In the months that we have been stationed in these damned woods, we have been killing time by uselessly repeating the same stupid drills over and over. We’ll never need them here, for these Russians have turned war topsy-turvy and are fighting without any rules. We are going into battle today and I wanted to finish this letter before I tried my luck again. . . .

“Congratulate me. It seems I have won a great victory today—rather unexpectedly, I must confess, I found the key to that accursed, enigmatic Russian soul that has caused us so much trouble. It’s the same old key that unlocked doors to us all over Europe. Nothing new about that. Money, my dear fellow! Just plain, ordinary money, subtly offered! It’s too

bad we have done so little bribing here, thinking that these Soviet Russians were a special sort of people who can be convinced only by Herr H's tommy gunners. You remember, I wrote to you in January about a local hunter, an ancient fellow who looks like King Lear and has a name I can't remember (devil take these Russian names!). Today I experimented on him and would you believe it, dear Willi, the experiment was very successful. For appearance's sake he at first hesitated, but finally he agreed to lead us today to. . . . Well, Kurt just came in to report that the battalion is ready and I guess I'll have to finish another time. . . ."

The ski battalion left the village at dusk, fully armed, their machine guns mounted on sleds. Soon they turned off the main road and disappeared in the forest.

The column was led by Matvei Kuzmin, who swept along on his homemade skis with the bold strides of a hunter. Darkness deepened. A dry, rustling snow was falling and soon it became so dark that one could see nothing but the back of the man in front. The old hunter plunged straight into virgin forest.

The battalion marched all night long through snowdrifts, over hard snow crust;

they crossed gullies and frozen streams and broke through underbrush. The officer, compass in hand, stopped Matvei several times and had his interpreter ask why their route turned and twisted so and whether they would soon reach their destination. Matvei invariably answered:

"There's no highways in the forest. . . . Patience, sir, we'll be there by morning." And each time he reminded the officer of the promised gun.

Weighed down by weapons and munitions, the Germans gradually became exhausted as they dragged themselves through the vast, primordial forest. They bumped into trees in the darkness, became entangled in bushes, stumbled over each other's skis, fell down and struggled back to their feet. They began to feel that this invisible forest, murmuring quietly but menacingly in the night, was deliberately casting snowdrifts in their way, grabbing at their uniforms with thorny claws and placing trees in their path. The corporals' shouts could no longer close up the ranks of the tired, straggling column.

At the first red glow in the frosty sky, the vanguard of the detachment finally reached the edge of the forest and halted in a clearing above a deep gully overgrown with brush.

"Looks like we're here. Matvei Kuzmin knows his business, all right," said the old man.

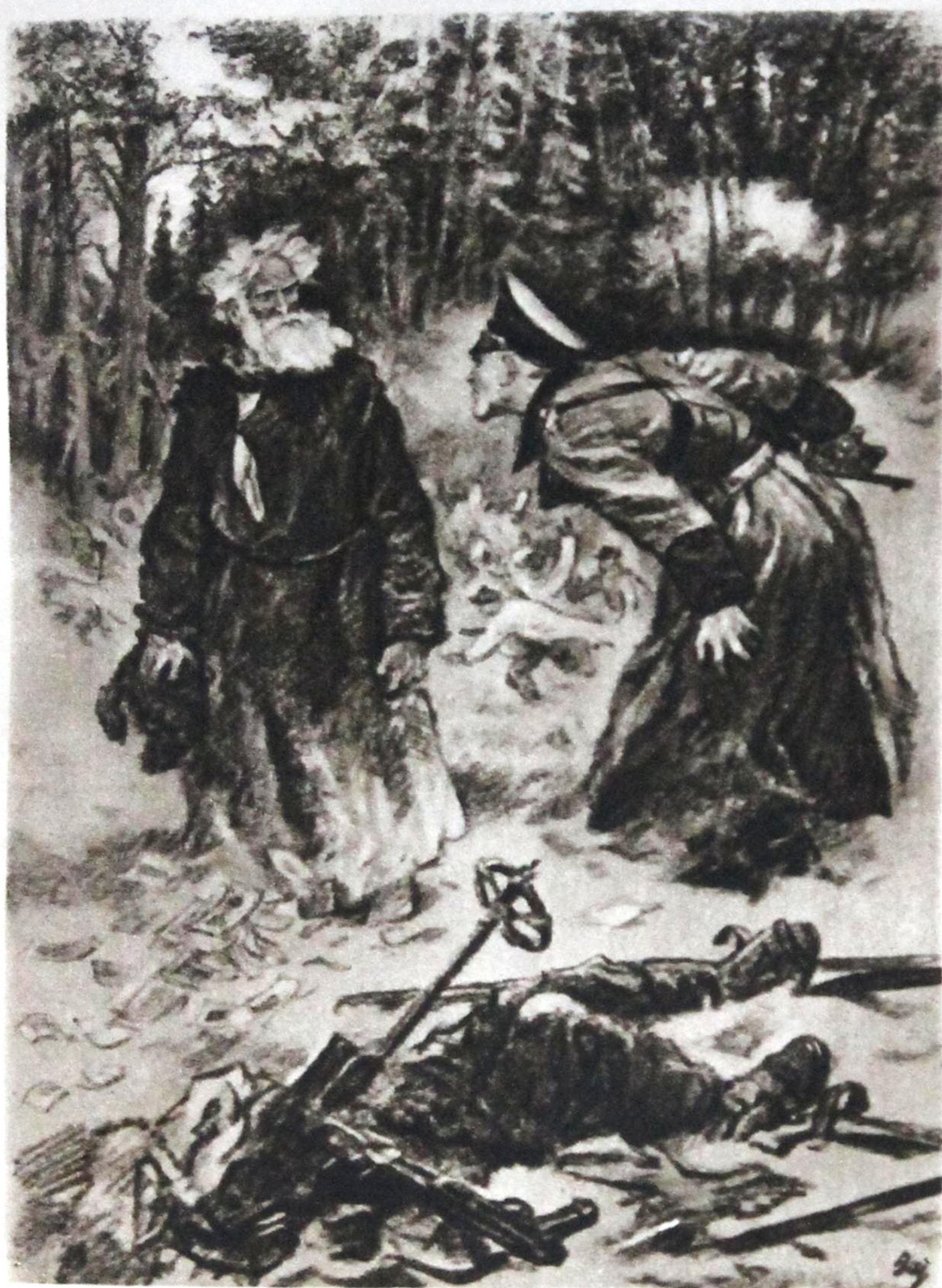
He took off his hat and wiped his perspiring bald pate.

The exhausted officers sank down on the snow, nervously smoking cigarettes which they could barely hold in their numbed, shaking fingers; with guttural shouts the corporals attempted to herd together the stragglers in white coveralls, now dirty and torn after the march. In the meanwhile, Matvei Kuzmin stood on the hillock, smiling and watching the rosy sun rise over the sparkling snow fields. He made no attempt to conceal an ironical smile as he glanced sidelong at the Germans.

It was a quiet, frosty morning. The snow crunched crisply under the skis. Fat, red-breasted bullfinches, busily husking small black pine cones, chirped noisily in the alder bushes. A dog barked somewhere very close by.

"Matvei Kuzmin knows his business, all right," repeated the old man.

A triumphant smile, originating in the bushy depths of his beard, flitted along the deep lines of his crinkled cheeks and lit up his sullen face.



Suddenly the silence was broken by the dry crackle of machine guns. Bullets whined, whipping up fountains of snow above the micaceous crust. Each round of fire was echoed through the woods. Hoarfrost fell softly from disturbed branches.

The machine guns were close by, firing almost point-blank. The skiers, not having time to grasp the situation, sank down on the hard snow, frightened and perplexed, while the machine guns kept chattering over the snowy plains, pressing the column from two sides with their crossfire. When they came to their senses, the Germans started for the woods; but tommy guns were already chattering angrily from behind the bushes....

Abandoning their skis with shouts of terror, the soldiers dashed around the clearing, falling in the dry snow. Dirty, torn coveralls spotted the sparkling crust. Recovering himself, the officer rushed at the old man.

Matvei Kuzmin stood bareheaded on the hummock. He could be seen from afar. The wind ruffled his beard and the grey hair framing his bald pate. His peering eyes had become youthful and glittered mockingly from under his bushy eyebrows. With gloating satisfaction, he watched the Germans running

around like frightened sheep, not even trying to defend themselves.

The officer's hair bristled under his cap. For an instant he stared with indefinable terror at this man of the woods who stood with such calm exultation in the midst of the death-stricken clearing. Then with a nervous jerk he yanked out his revolver and aimed it straight at the old man's forehead.

Matvei Kuzmin laughed mockingly and fearlessly into his face:

"You wanted to buy old Matvei? . . . You judge others by yourself, fascist! . . ."

The old man tore the hundred-ruble bills from his cap lining, flung them at the officer, and contemptuously turned his back on the revolver. He noticed that the machine gunners were not shooting at the hillock on which he was standing for fear of hitting him. The Germans also noticed this and made a dash for the woods under cover of the hillock. Some of them, having surmounted the last snowdrifts, had almost reached safety at the forest edge.

Matvei Kuzmin waved his shaggy cap and shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Lads! Don't spare old Matvei! Let them have it! Don't let a single viper escape! . . . Matvei. . . ."

He broke off, groaned, and sank slowly to the ground, struck down by the German officer's bullet. But the officer did not escape. The machine guns got him before he had hardly taken two steps.

Far away in the gully, a "hurrah" rang out, growing louder and louder. Tommy gunners dashed over the wind-polished snow at the edge of the forest. Firing on the run, they broke across the clearing, pursuing the remaining Germans, sending a shower of bullets after them, overtaking them, knocking them down, disarming them, and running further into the snowy froth of the forest, following the footsteps in the snow.

Vasya Kuzmin, the old hunter's grandson who had been sent by his grandfather to warn the Soviet troops, was with the tommy gunners. Running at the heels of the advancing soldiers was Sharik, breathless from angry barking and struggling in the deep snow. Suddenly he stopped and pricked up his ears in perplexity. The din of battle in the forest was pierced by an anguished, long-drawn howl.

That was how Matvei Kuzmin, kolkhoznik from the Kolkhoz *Rassvet* near Velikiye Luki (a district now famous for its flax) spent the last day of his long life.

He was buried on the high bank of the Lovat River—buried with military honours, like an officer: three salvoes over the fresh brown grave among the white expanses of fields.

That same evening the chief of the division's intelligence department examined the documents of the dead Germans and read the letter of the German officer which Engineer Wilhelm Stein of Saxony was never to receive.



Private of the Guards

APPARENTLY the major was calm and reserved by nature, and like all real soldiers, sparing of words, but he told me the story of this private with unconcealed enthusiasm:

“And there’s one more queer thing about him, or rather a distinguishing feature. He can’t bear the sight of a live fascist. I’m not exaggerating. . . . Of course, all of us have accounts to settle with Hitler, both private and public. He interrupted our peaceful life, broke up this one’s family, destroyed that one’s home, killed another’s father or brother. And especially those of us who have been on liberated territory and seen what they did to our people there. . . .”

Just then, a high voice came from behind the door:

"Comrade Major of the Guards, may I come in?"

"Yes," answered the major, and his baritone voice, hoarse from a cold, immediately became more gentle.

A figure made invisible by the cloud of cold vapour which rushed in with the opening of the door, crossed the wooden floor with resolute steps, saluted, and stood at attention:

"Comrade Major, Guardsman Sinitsky reporting in response to your order."

In the semidarkness of the empty hut, lighted by the only remaining window (which was two-thirds covered with straw), stood a slender boy dressed in full military uniform. He looked like a real soldier, only half the normal size. He had a round childish face, turned-up nose, full lips, and soft down on his ruddy cheeks.

Everything about him—his well-fitting uniform, his snugly belted sheepskin jacket, his fur cap at a rakish angle, and the manner in which he held the short cavalry carbine at his side—bespoke the seasoned soldier, fully adapted to all the hardships of war.

He seemed to be no more than thirteen or fourteen. But the two thin lines around his mouth which seemed traced by a needle,

and the expression of his large, clear eyes, too calm for his age, betrayed what he had experienced and gave his face a mature look.

The major gazed with undisguised satisfaction at this tough little soldier standing at attention before him. Jovial sparks of affection lighted his tired eyes, red from long sleepless nights in the trenches. But he introduced the lad very officially:

"Meet Guardsman Mikhail Nikolayevich Sinitsky, sniper and trench mortarman, son of the regiment.... At ease. Sit down at the table, Misha, you'll be our guest."

The boy sat down and, without any particular reason, pushed back his fur cuff to glance at the fine gold watch on his wrist. It seemed to me that he was in a hurry.

Son of the regiment! That was the name given to this remarkable little soldier by the men of Major Kurakin's Guards regiment. All the soldiers with whom I spoke pronounced these words lovingly, without any of the bantering condescension with which grownups usually refer to youngsters accidentally thrown in their midst. They all willingly told about various events in this little man's life.

Here is the story of Misha Sinitsky stripped of the exaggerations and embellishments un-

wittingly added by the men in their unselfish enthusiasm.

Before the war, Misha lived in the village of Ivanovka, Andreyevsky District, Smolensk Region. He lived the ordinary life of a kolkhoz child; he went to school in the winter, skated on the pond and slid down the hill in an "ice-boat"—an old sieve filled with straw which had been specially soaked in water and allowed to freeze. In the summer he helped his father in the field, even earned workdays* by organizing the children into a brigade of weederers and hay dryers. Most of the time, however, he spent on the river, fishing for crabs with tainted meat and spearing spotted gudgeons in the deep water near the ferry.

He had a childish but fully defined ambition—he loved machines and spent hours standing under the shingled roof of the Machine-Tractor Station reverently watching the grimy-faced mechanics repair machines under the guidance of Nikitin, the jolly, lame brigade leader. And when, as a special favour, Nikitin permitted the boy to wipe the grease off some old pinion with worn-out teeth or let him

* A unit by which the amount of work of each member of a kolkhoz is calculated.—*Tr.*

tighten bolts with a wrench, Misha was filled with endless pride.

He dreamed of becoming a mechanic. This aspiration led him to great lengths. Once when all were out in the fields, Misha decided to repair the kitchen clock. After taking it apart, he discovered that most of the screws and nuts did not fit each other and that there was a surplus of wheels. For this little venture into the realms of scientific investigation, the would-be mechanic was rewarded by the feel of his father's strap on the softer parts of his body.

But in general, life flowed along smoothly and Misha would surely have become a mechanic had it not been for the unforeseen circumstance of war. On the very first day Misha's father reported to the military commissariat.

"Misha, you'll be the only man in the house now. Take care of the women," said his father half in jest, half in earnest, as he jumped up onto one of the carts taking the enlisted men from this kolkhoz to the district centre.

Misha actually became the head of the family, for his mother was sick and his two sisters very small. The war was not very frightening from afar. And at first it did not affect

the prosperity which the kolkhoz had attained in recent years. The children, as care-free as ever, ran around playing Red Army men and fascists. Of course no one wanted to be a fascist. Coins were tossed and the winners were the Red Army men, who wiped out the fascists in no time.

Misha watched the games from a distance, trying to conceal the fact that they held any interest for him.

"I haven't the time: the house needs a man's care. You can't depend on women!" said Misha seriously to the other boys of his age who invited him to "fight Hitler."

And then quickly and very unexpectedly, the war came to Ivanovka. It was no longer a game. At first the highway was filled with endless columns of refugees, trucks and carts loaded with household goods, and herds of dusty, hungry, emaciated cows. This dismal stream of people brought news from the west, each story more astounding than the previous one. They told of tanks that knew no barriers, of roaring planes which destroyed all and everything. Then the planes themselves appeared, flying along the highway, strafing the refugees, and leaving the victims to be buried by the kolkhozniks.

Far off, the artillery thundered harmlessly

like a summer storm. It was rumoured that the Germans had broken through somewhere near Vitebsk. Then came the troops, marching out of step, in straggling, tired columns. Their tunics were dark with sweat, their faces black with dust. They hurried through the village, morose and gloomy, looking at no one and answering no questions. On this same day the kolkhoz cattle was driven east. Misha thought of offering to drive the cows, but no one paid any attention to him. His mother was still sick and his sisters very small. In other words, Misha remained. On the next day a long column of strange tanks and machines painted a sinister greenish-grey like the scales of a fish, crawled along the highroad.

Nothing special happened in Ivanovka on that day. A few motorcyclists wearing horned helmets, funny short jackets and clumsy boots with wide tops, made brief stops in passing. The soldiers drank from the well, chattering away amongst themselves. Then they ran around the village, guffawing loudly as they looked for chickens and geese. They killed the birds in their own way, hitting them on the head so skilfully with a thin whip that a chicken or goose would fall dead from a single blow. They filled the sidecars of their motorcycles with booty, sniggering and winking the

while, and then rode off in a roar of motors. After they had gone, the villagers said that the devil wasn't as black as he was painted. There was a hope that they would somehow manage to hold out until the Red Army rallied its forces.

Machines of all kinds and sizes crept along the highway for about ten days. The front moved to the east, the cannonade abated, and then the village learned what the enemy really was, what slavery meant.

Germans in black uniforms arrived in automobiles to replace those who had been dressed in the colour of swampweed. Within the next few days Misha saw more suffering than he would ever have witnessed in the course of his entire life had there been no war. He saw how the fascists herded the inhabitants to the edge of the village and forced them to watch the execution of three people: an unknown girl; Mikolaich, an inoffensive old man who was a crop inspector; and Misha's hero, Nikitin, the lame brigade leader from the Machine-Tractor Station. Nikitin stood near the shed, his hands tied. Until he fell dead on the grass, riddled by tommy-gun bullets, Nikitin kept threatening the fascists with vengeance. He promised them that the day of reckoning would come and fascism and Hitler would be

wiped off the face of the earth. Later the soldiers slaughtered the stud bull, Vaska, for which the kolkhoz had been awarded a gold medal at the Agricultural Exhibition. They confiscated all the food supplies and clothing that the people had not had time to hide. When winter set in and snow covered the mournful fields with their patches of rusty, unreaped rye and black potato stalks, the soldiers evicted the peasants from their homes.

Misha's mother cried and did not want to leave, but the bespectacled German who was quartered in their house took her by the shoulder and shoved her through the door with such violence that she slipped and fell headfirst into the snow.

Misha took his mother and sisters to a spacious slit trench in the garden, dug during the first days of the war.

He settled his family in the trench, making it warmer by heaping straw, sacking, and old rags on top. He dug a hearth and brought in a supply of branches and twigs. He then disappeared without saying a word to anyone. Misha had gone to search for the partisans of whom the Germans quartered in the village spoke with mortal fear. No one in the village knew what the partisans were doing,

but the Germans were so afraid of them that at night they blocked the cottage doors with carts and sleighs and barricaded their windows with all kinds of household goods. Not knowing any of the rendezvous of the partisans, nor where they had their headquarters, the boy roamed the forest for several days. And, incredible as it may sound, he finally found them. Among them were the kolkhoz agronomist, two teachers, and a mechanic from the Machine-Tractor Station—all his old acquaintances.

Once there, the frozen, exhausted child began telling the partisans about the fascist outrages, about how small their garrison was, and how they feared partisan vengeance. That same night he led a group of partisans to Ivanovka. The raid was successful; only a few of the uninvited guests escaped alive. The group returned to the forest with rich war booty.

It was already a cold December with snapping frosts. The Germans, defeated at Moscow, were retreating through deep snows. Day and night endless columns of Red Cross ambulances passed the village going west along the highway, which was now like a wide trench between mountains of snow. The retreating army had no time to deal with the parti-

sans, so the raid in Ivanovka remained unavenged.

Soon, however, a large sapper unit was stationed in the village. They began building a fortified line along the highway. Again people were evicted from their homes. Plunder and extortions began anew. Taught by experience, the Germans now used hounds to scent out goods buried in yards and gardens. They dug up everything they found, thus depriving the inhabitants of their last possessions. The occupants had lost their former chic, and wandered around the village in felt boots, peasants' sheepskins, women's padded jackets, or anything else that could help keep them warm. Encouraged by the success of the first raid, Misha decided to call in the partisans again. But there was no opportunity. Large numbers of Germans were now billeted in the village and they were more vigilant. Guards and sentries were posted everywhere. On dark nights they continuously sent up flares, and the ghoul- ish white lights quivered over the snowy fields until morning.

But at last an opportunity came. The German Christmas arrived. From early in the morning the Germans shaved and preened themselves. A machine came bringing paper sacks filled with gifts and collapsible cardboard

Christmas trees decorated with cotton and tinsel. The soldiers were issued additional rum rations, and then these men who had chased women and children into the biting frost of the icy dugouts, themselves sat down at tables decorated with these ersatz Christmas trees, placed photos of their wives and children beneath them, and sang melancholy Christmas carols.

At this moment, the partisans attacked the village. Again the Germans fled, abandoning a number of automobiles and a large supply of sapper equipment. The partisans very methodically burnt the automobiles and smashed the equipment. The commander of the unit, a Party member and Misha's former history teacher, ordered the Christmas gifts to be distributed among the women who had small children. On this dark and frosty night Misha made a round of the houses with a large sack, distributing gifts from the German Santa Claus, readdressed by the partisans.

But in doing this, the cautious lad blundered; he disclosed his connections with the partisan unit. In the morning appeared punitive troops, dressed in the black uniforms which he knew so well. Once more began arrests and tortures. Someone must have betrayed Misha Sinitsky. The boy managed to slip away, but

the SS men seized his mother, little sisters, and all his relatives, locking them up in the cellar where the farm's dairy products had once been kept in the happy days of the kolkhoz.

The boy must have greatly interested the hangmen. Perhaps through him they wanted to discover the secret paths to the partisan camp; or perhaps their nervous chiefs in Smolensk demanded the capture of all the leaders of the rebellious village. Whatever their motive, notices were posted on all road-signs and at all crossroads in which the commander of the special "mobile unit" declared that if by a certain date and hour the "adolescent" Mikhail Sinitsky did not report at his former school, his mother, sisters and relatives would be shot. If, however, "the aforementioned adolescent sees fit to make a reappearance," they would be released and he would merely be sent to Germany "to undergo a course in labour discipline."

Misha decided to report. The partisans tried to convince him that he would save no one and only harm himself. The commander, Misha's former teacher, made an effort to prove to him that all the concepts of military honour and duty which he had once taught his pupils had been violated and trampled

in the dust by fascism. But to no avail. Misha's mind was dominated by a single thought: "They'll shoot me, of course, but let them: I'm a partisan. But why should my mother, sisters and relatives suffer? It's better for me to die alone than for the whole family to be wiped out."

Finally the commander, tired of trying to convince him, locked him in the dugout. During the night the boy burrowed his way out, left the camp, and went to the office of the SS chief located in the school building. Even after several years had passed, he became agitated on relating how the fat red-headed German had laughed in his face exposing two rows of metal teeth as he sat rocking on his chair. From time to time he had caught his breath, wiped the sweat from his face, once more looked at the astonished boy and at the notice Misha held in his hand, leaned back, and again burst out laughing as though someone were tickling him. Then suddenly he broke off, waved his hand and said something to the soldier standing at the door. The soldier grabbed Misha under the arms and carried him out of the room while the boy cried and struggled frenziedly.

Misha could not remember how he landed in the cellar. When he came to, he felt the

touch of tender, rough, familiar hands on his face. He understood immediately that they were the hands of his mother. Invisible in the darkness, she bent over him and placed something cool and wet on his temples—it was the rime which clung like white fur to walls and ceilings. The room was so crowded with people awaiting death, that the rime melted and dripped from the ceiling. Misha noticed his sisters and relatives near his mother. And then he understood everything. He became frantic. He threw himself on the slimy brick floor, banging it with his fists, shedding angry tears, answering no one and listening to no one. Then he quieted down, became silent, and hid in the corner like a hunted animal. His mother rocked the younger sister, trying to warm her with her body. The even steps of the sentry echoed hollowly as he marched back and forth over the cellar. Someone who had been beaten to a state of half-consciousness gave a painful cough.

“Fool!... Oh, what a fool!... I believed them! Believed those devils!...” This thought continued to torture Misha. The people in the crowded cellar relapsed into heavy slumber. His mother leaned against the wall and snored lightly, as she was wont, while the baby on her knee made little sucking noises

in her sleep. The snow crunched under the sentry's boots. Somewhere up above dogs howled and clanked their chains. But Misha could not sleep; he could only lie there cursing himself, tortured by his helplessness, recalling the SS chief with his metal teeth. He groaned and ground his teeth. Perhaps it was then that the two lines of suffering were etched on his ruddy face, still covered with childish down.

All of a sudden, just before dawn, rifle shots were heard close by. The cellar became alive in a moment. Instinctively the prisoners moved closer together. The shooting drew nearer. A machine gun chattered overhead. Then everything was silent. The trapdoor was opened, letting in a blinding ray of light. An excited, raucous voice asked in Russian:

“Hello! Anybody alive down there?”

This happened during the first winter offensive of the Red Army, during the stormy days when our front sometimes moved westward dozens of kilometres in a single night. A Guards regiment advancing along the highway burst into Ivanovka and unexpectedly freed Misha and his relatives. When Soviet power was re-established in the village and the boy no longer had to worry about his mother, who was well on the road to recovery,

he joined the Guards ski unit which had liberated his village. They did not want to take him at first and told him to go home. Misha went to the major, who, on hearing the boy's story from the soldiers, had him included in the rations list.

A uniform was made for Misha and a short carbine was obtained from the cavalrymen. Misha Sinitsky became a Red Army Guardsman, a participant in all the glorious exploits of his ski battalion, sharing all the hardships of his fellow soldiers. He was appointed to a trench mortar platoon. Keen, persevering and clever, with a knack for mechanics, he quickly mastered the simple technique of the trench mortar and was soon awarded the badge of "Expert Mortarman."

But trench mortar crews do not fight the enemy every day. And this little soldier's hatred was so burning and inexhaustible that it gave him no peace. Remaining a member of the trench mortar crew, he made friends with the snipers. The days that the mortar crews were not busy, Misha donned his white coverall, to which he had himself sewn fir-tree twigs, and went to the edge of the forest before sunrise. He settled himself, cleverly camouflaged, somewhere close to German positions. There he would wait, hour after hour, some-

times for a whole day, until his eyes ached from staring into the snowy expanses. He would wait until the figure of a German would climb out of the blindage on to the path for a breath of air. Then, with bated breath, his heart pounding, every nerve taut, Misha would take careful aim, his whole being becoming one with his little carbine.

A shot—and the German would stumble and fall. On such a day Misha would return to his company singing merrily. His cheerful laughter would ring out in the trench, sounding incongruous under those austere conditions.

But Misha was not always so lucky. One day he came back from his "hunting" gloomy and depressed. Without saying a word, he threw himself onto his bunk. The soldiers began asking him what the matter was, why he was so upset. It turned out that he had tracked down an officer in a tall hat and well-tailored greatcoat with a brown fur collar. The German had reminded him very much of the one with the metal teeth who had laughed at him in the school.

Misha took aim with exceptional care. He became as motionless as though turned to stone. But just as he pulled the trigger the snow crust under his elbow gave way and he

missed. The officer looked around, and jumped into the trench, dropping his cap in his haste. Beside himself with rage, the little sniper shot at the cap. The second shot disclosed his hiding place. They saw him and opened fire. Misha heard the whining of the bullets over his head and, unmindful of the danger, cursed himself with all the words known to him. Such a target! To miss such a target!

On returning to the blindage the Red Army Guardsman threw himself on his bunk, his face buried in straw, and cried all day.

Once the commander of the front, a well-known Soviet general on his way to the observation post, drove through the village where the ski battalion was resting. His driver stopped at a well to fill his radiator. The general got out to stretch his legs and saw Guardsman Mikhail Sinitsky crossing the road to the kitchen with his messkit.

The commander called to him. Without displaying the slightest timidity, Misha reported as befits a soldier—clearly, cheerfully, and confidently. This won the heart of the old Soviet commander, who asked Misha who he was and what he was doing here. Upon receiving an intelligent and exhaustive answer, he ordered his aide to write down Misha's name

and regiment. When the radiator was filled, the general drove off. And the skiers, having rested, went into battle. Misha forgot all about his meeting with the commander, until one day a code came from division headquarters demanding that Guardsman Mikhail Sinitsky report to the staff headquarters with his documents and personal belongings. The code explained that by order of the commander, the boy was being sent to the rear to study.

But this was not the end of Guardsman Sinitsky's war record. One evening sometime later as the commander of the front, accompanied by his aides, was returning from a telephone conversation over the direct wire, a little figure in an army sheepskin suddenly popped out from under the feet of one of the aides. He drew himself up to attention, clicked his heels and in a clear ringing voice reported:

"Red Army Guardsman Mikhail Sinitsky. Permit me to report, Comrade Colonel General."

In spite of the unexpectedness of this meeting, the commander immediately recognized the boy, and being in a good mood as a result of his telephone conversation, he replied merrily:

"Well, go ahead. First of all, tell me where you came from. How did you get here?"

The little soldier gave a boyish whistle and disparaging gesture, as if to say it was not so difficult for one like him to get to staff headquarters and even under the very feet of the commander. The general laughed and ordered Private Sinitsky to follow him. In the general's cabin they had a talk which I have recorded as accurately as possible from the general's own words:

"Why aren't you in school studying?"

"Permit me to report, Comrade Colonel General, that I want to fight."

"Very good. You'll finish your studies, become an officer, and then go fight."

"Ye-s-s . . . but the war will be over by that time, and you'll wipe out all the fascists without me, Comrade Colonel General."

The commander did not reply. An unwonted expression of deep feeling crossed his stern, unsmiling face. And his steel grey eyes, which sometimes made even generals tremble, narrowed and sparkled with laughter.

"So you want to get back to your regiment?"

"Yes, Comrade Commander. I'll study after the war. I'm young, I'll still have time, Com-

rade Colonel General. I can't study while they are crawling all over our land." And forgetting himself, he changed back from the soldier into the boy as he added: "Of course you don't know what they're like—how could you? But I've had much too close a look at them!"

The general gave a broad smile, a thing which rarely happened with him.

"All right, have it your own way. Go ahead and fight," he said. Then, after a brief pause he took off his wrist watch and offered it to the boy. "Something to remember me by, my little warrior. Here, give me your wrist. I'll put it on so it won't fall off."

With a glance at the door, he suddenly embraced the child with the round, close-cropped head and kissed him on the forehead like a father blessing his son on setting out to perform some great feat.

"All right, go ahead and fight," he repeated and turned to the map, studying it with exaggerated attention.

And Red Army Guardsman Mikhail Sinitsky returned to his regiment to go on fighting.





A Handful of Earth

EXCITEMENT made the regimental commander's voice, usually so calm and composed, almost unrecognizable through the phone:

"Report the situation. As quickly as possible!"

Without putting down the receiver, Lieutenant Moiseyenko thrust his head out of the blindage and looked around.

The top of the hill, towering high over the marshy lowlands, commanded a broad view of the surrounding area in all four directions. The sun had not yet risen from behind the stunted and rugged birch grove some distance away. But the first golden rays were struggling through the leaves, gilding the eastern slopes, and making the dewdrops on the grass sparkle like diamonds. Grey shadows still lay over the lowlands. Larks were singing above

the cool, ascending fog, and only a trained eye could distinguish some vague movement in this peaceful, deserted, landscape.

It was not for nothing that Moiseyenko had fought for so long as an artillery observer: his sharp eye missed no essential detail in the scene.

“A train of about 40 carts is moving along the road from the west—are you following it on the 500,000 scale map?—there at the bridge over the stream. The tail end is hidden in fog. There’s a column of tarpaulin-covered trucks on the northern sector of the road. What? Hauling munitions, I suppose. Nobody in sight around the trucks. There’s a company of infantry on the edge of the forest and three guns pointed in our direction. . . . They’ll probably attack us soon. . . .”

A hoarse sigh sounded in the receiver.

“It’ll be hard, Lieutenant. Listen to battle orders: hold out until evening. Understand? Not a single cart or car is to pass along the road. Understand? Hold out to the last man. Do you hear? Hold out until nightfall—then I’ll come to your aid. . . . Well, Moiseyenko. . . .” The regimental commander’s voice faltered. “Remember, I’m depending on you; the main thing is—hang on to the roads, grab them by the throat, so that. . . .”

Came a sickening, ever-increasing sound, penetrating like cold to the very marrow. A mine exploded somewhere close by. The earth trembled. Dry sand rustled between the logs of the blindage. Suddenly the telephone went dead in the middle of a word and the lieutenant realized that the thing he had most feared had happened. The undiscernible thread of wire in the grass, the only connection between the handful of men on the hill and the regiment which had retreated yesterday, was severed.

Moiseyenko cast a sidelong glance at the soldiers who had been listening to the conversation from a distance, then drew himself up and reported into the dead telephone:

“Comrade Regimental Commander, your battle orders have been received. Not even a rabbit will slip across the road to the front as long as one of us remains alive.”

After placing the now useless phone on the box, he looked questioningly at the soldiers. There were only nineteen of them—all that remained of the platoon after yesterday's battle for this height. Of the nineteen, five were wounded. He knew most of them very well. They had retreated with him all the way from the Latvian border to the city

of Kalinin, then back again from Kalinin to the Rzhev marshes where the line of the front had held during the winter and trench warfare had set in. Now they stood thoughtful, silent and calm. It seemed to the officer that the tall and spruce machine-gunner Fadeyev, a man no longer young, was smiling slightly as he puffed at the cigarette held in his smoke-stained palm. The lieutenant suddenly felt ashamed of his cunningness. These men were soldiers and should be told things straight.

"Communications with the regiment have been broken. However, orders were received," said the lieutenant, fearing that his voice might reveal the alarm which had suddenly seized him on realizing that he was the one now in command and that on his ability, efficiency, and resolution depended the lives of these people as well as the fate of the whole regiment, exhausted by unequal battle. "The Fritzes have only these two roads across the marshes. Our height is like a lock keeping them from passing. Of course the Germans will spare no effort to smash this lock, for without munitions their forces cannot advance.... The commander of the regiment has ordered that not a single vehicle be allowed to pass to the front line. Well?"

The soldiers silently smoked their hand-rolled cigarettes. The bluish smoke clung to the dewy grass.

Machine gunner Bezdolya, a powerful, energetic Siberian, was absorbed in weaving a wreath of daisies from the bunch lying on his knees. All watched his large dextrous fingers as though the destiny of this small group, left on enemy territory by the vicissitudes of fate, depended on the weaving of this garland.

The lieutenant was younger than any of his men. He had been a student in the third year at the university when he enlisted. And now before the greatest and, perhaps the last battle in his life, he wanted to say something special to these men about their native land, about their duty, and about the great cause for which the Soviet people were fighting. But when he once again looked at the remnants of his platoon, he suddenly calmed down and only said:

"Is everything clear?"

"Perfectly clear," someone answered.

"The Germans will pass only over our dead bodies," added Bezdolya, putting aside the unfinished wreath and brushing the dewy daisies from his knees. For some reason these flowers reminded fathers of their children far away.

Machine gunner Fadeyev, who had been watching the Germans through the embrasure, pricked up his ears, screwed up his eyes, and bit his lips. Then he slowly left the embrasure, put out his cigarette with saliva and frugally hid the butt in the leather band of his cap.

“Comrade Lieutenant, the Germans are stirring on the edge of the forest. It looks as though they will begin an attack from the forest, there on the sunny side.”

The lieutenant raised the binoculars and immediately put them down again on the parapet to conceal the involuntary trembling of his hands. The grey figures of Germans grew steadily larger as they broke through the fog, moving towards the height in semi-circular open formation, uncamouflaged, not even crouching, with tommy guns ready.

“Look how bold the scoundrels are—don’t even bother camouflaging themselves!” said Fadeyev placing his eye to the sight of the machine gun. “Come closer, come on, I’ll give you a good welcome!”

“They probably think the artillery crushed us all last night, or that we slipped away in the fog,” conjectured Bezdolya, whose machine gun was turned towards the west in case of attack from that side.

The soldiers' remarks suggested a plan of defence to the lieutenant.

"Stand to.... Ready for battle! Pass the order: not to shoot without command!"

The Germans could already be seen with the bare eye. They advanced as before, erect. The vanguard had reached the foot of the hill. They were clearly seen up to the waist, as if floating in the white mist. Now they began climbing, and it seemed as though they were emerging from a milky lake....

All one size—no less, no more—
Led by gallant Chernomor....

Incongruously enough, this line from Pushkin came to the lieutenant's mind as he lay there gripping his tommy gun, suppressing an overwhelming desire to fire at the strapping, bald German in glasses but without a cap who was advancing at the head of the column.

"Don't fire without command, my shot will be the signal," he repeated, feeling that his tunic had become damp and sticky and was hindering him. With a swift movement he tore open his collar and immediately glanced at Fadeyev to see if he had noticed it.

But the machine gunner, and his assistant, lighted by the direct rays of the morning sun

coming through the embrasure, stood as though carved from stone, pale, with clenched jaws, apparently also struggling with a passionate desire to press the trigger and shoot these enemies who were already well within aim.

"Why am I so excited?" thought the lieutenant. "It's not the first time, is it?" But he immediately answered himself: "There are so many of them. A company? Perhaps two? Perhaps a battalion?" The machine gunner was probably thinking the same.

"Swarming like lice on a collarband," he muttered through his teeth.

As if in answer to this remark, the words of the great general Suvorov flashed through the lieutenant's mind:

"Fight not with numbers, but with skill."

"'Not with numbers, but with skill,' do you hear, Fadeyev?" said the lieutenant.

Fadeyev nodded without taking his eyes off the sights. Suddenly the lieutenant looked at these grey figures as if he were seeing them from a new angle, as if they were on the cinema screen, unhurriedly climbing this slope bisected by trenches seemingly empty and deserted. He suddenly felt an intoxicating joy flow into his body. "Not with numbers, but with skill."

"But I must not miss the crucial moment," he thought, trying not to lose sight of the bald German with the broad forehead whose cap was thrust under his shoulder straps. He was advancing heavily, no more than twenty paces away; beads of sweat were discernible on the bridge of his nose. His jacket sleeves were pushed up above the elbow, disclosing thick, hairy, knotty arms.

Now! The lieutenant pulled the trigger. A look of surprise flashed across the face of the German, followed by a grimace of pain. As if stumbling, he fell on the grass. And immediately the silent hill spoke in a chorus. A second German fell, a fifth, a twelfth.... The grey chain girdling the hill snapped, broke up, and after a moment's hesitation rolled back as if swept by a whirlwind. The soldiers ran, leaping with huge bounds, spurred on by fear and inertia. The defenders of the height fired at them calmly and accurately, as though they were so many wild geese.

"There you are—not with numbers, but with skill!" yelled the lieutenant as he changed the disk and sighted the fleeing grey figures swaying above the dissolving fog.

To save ammunition the men abandoned their machine guns and took up rifles. The

shots from the blindage were few but accurate.

The garrison on the hilltop became jubilant. Someone shouted "hurrah" at the top of his voice, another put two fingers in his mouth and whistled at the Germans like boys at a fleeing dog.

"That was some treat! They got what was coming to them all right!... And they thought we no longer existed!" laughed the husky Bezdolya, merrily nudging his assistant, a fair, middle-aged fellow. "But here we were—come into my parlour—won't you sit down? Just look how many stayed with us! Two dead Germans to each one of us. Look, look, one is still crawling over there near that birch tree! Here, give me a gun and I'll put an end to him."

"Perhaps now they won't come back until evening."

"A fat chance! You want to fight the easy way! Fritz is stubborn."

The lieutenant knew that Bezdolya was right. It was too soon to rejoice. Having burnt their fingers in a direct attack, the Germans would probably resort to some trick; perhaps they would bring tanks and aeroplanes into action. Only rifle shots could be heard from the front line, which was quite close. Evi-

dently the offensive was being held up. The munitions were out there on the roads, the queues of cars getting longer and longer.

Encouraged by success, the lieutenant analyzed the situation calmly and systematically. The thought of death had completely left him. Everything was once more in its proper place, and war was again the usual difficult job. Having decided that the Germans would surely attack the blindage on the hilltop, he ordered the soldiers to disperse into the fox-holes in the slopes. He himself also crawled into one. His decision was correct. At midday four bombers appeared from beyond the woods and unhurriedly swooped down on the blindage. Bombs screeched through the air. Black geysers of earth and rock spouted into the sky. When the dust had settled, they could see the logs of the bombed blindage standing on end. The German battery opened fire simultaneously from the fringe of the forest. The hill shook from explosions which enveloped the summit in brown clouds of upturned earth.

Now, as always during such a shelling, when black fountains of earth leapt into the sky and the world was shaken to its foundations, everything inside of man contracted and went cold, and he involuntarily clung to the

earth, trying to squeeze himself into it. And as always, he ignored the consolations of reason and strained his ear to catch the crescent-shaped screeching of bombs, the grinding whistle of mines or the formidable rustle of shells, figuring the while: this will land to the left, this will fly over, and the next, where will the next one land?

But when sitting in the narrow foxholes, so cramped that it was even impossible to bend their knees, seasoned soldiers felt themselves more or less safe. The dampness and the very smell of the earth seemed to comfort them. During a moment of quiet between explosions the lieutenant heard Bezdolya's bass booming loudly, perhaps on purpose, so the others could hear:

"They're trying hard all right, but it's no use. No use, I say. Just causing their Hitler unnecessary expense; no use, I tell you."

Nervous laughter came from various spots on the shell-scarred slopes.

During another interval between explosions someone sighed:

"What good hay is being ruined! If it was mowed on time, what wonderful hay it would be!"

"Imagine grudging the hay! When whole cities are burning! . . . The only thing that

counts is to smash them, the devils! Nothing's too good to sacrifice for this! Imagine—hay!”

At last the barrage ceased. A menacing silence reigned. The lieutenant felt rather than saw that the Germans were preparing for a new attack. But now they were being very careful. The field was deserted, except for a quick flash at the edge of the forest. Evidently the Germans were studying the height through binoculars.

The smoke of the explosions settled. Not a man could be seen on the hill; the demolished blindage was silent and it seemed even to Lieutenant Moiseyenko that there could be nothing left alive on this mangled, mutilated earth. The lieutenant crawled along the passages from one foxhole to another. He knew the next encounter would be the decisive one. He crawled to Bezdolya who even here in this temporary trench, in two hours' time and under enemy fire had had time to settle himself comfortably, to dig shelves in the damp clay for his tobacco, pipe, pouch, and hand grenades.

“Well, will we hold them back?”

“We'll hold them back all right!” whispered Bezdolya and added: “Don't worry about me, it's not my first, Comrade Lieutenant. Go over to him—he's trembling like a

leaf." He pointed to the neighbouring foxhole where a pock-marked soldier sat huddled up on the very bottom. This fellow, father of a large family, had always taken pleasure in reading his letters from home aloud to his comrades during hours of respite.

"We've showed them something!" said the lieutenant crawling up to him. "Once we've held this height, you'll have something real to write about to your Katya! I'll also add a few lines to tell her what a hero you are, only watch out you don't shoot without orders. Your aim has to be sure—our cartridges are numbered."

"There are so many of them!" sighed the soldier, raising his haggard, pale, unshaven face, on which every pock mark now stood out clearly.

"There are many to be sure, but we killed plenty. 'Not with numbers, but with skill'.... There they lie, count them while you have nothing else to do. How they ran!"

"But this will be the end of us," said the soldier despondently. "And I have five children!"

The lieutenant grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, looking straight into the dull, confused eyes:

"Quit that talk, do you hear? Hold tight

and you'll stay alive. Do you hear? Well, let's have a smile—broader—still broader. Now you'll stay alive for sure!"

The lieutenant tried to say something to each soldier in these minutes of tense, ominous silence, or at least to pat them on the back encouragingly. He now believed blindly and passionately in the impossible. And this belief, which had come to him on recalling Suvorov's motto "not with numbers, but with skill," filled him with reckless energy, stimulating him, even cheering him like strong drink.

The Germans now advanced with caution. They crawled across the field, girdling the height in a close, ever-narrowing ring. The only sign of their approach was the stirring of the grass. It seemed as though a herd of wild boars was advancing. The ones in the vanguard had already begun to climb the hill. Their grey forage caps appeared for a moment and then disappeared. The strained ear caught the crunching of pebbles under their hobnailed boots. The heart beat loudly; breathing became heavy; temples ached from the tension. Now they leapt up and were running, firing on the run at the demolished blindage and the summit of the hill.

"Fire!" yelled the lieutenant with all his might.

And again the hill reared and roared with shots, and again its shell-scarred slopes sent a shower of bullets at the enemy. The machine gunners sent over brief volleys; the riflers sustained a carefully aimed fire. The Germans fell, pitching onto the earth, but others came on and on.

“Fire! Fire!” yelled the lieutenant, and his tommy gun hissed as a bead of sweat fell on it.

On three sides of the hill the Germans could hold out no longer and rolled back, but on the fourth, the south side where there was no machine gun, they continued to advance. They were very close, but hidden behind the ridge. Suddenly several figures appeared on the ridge. Shots rang out, but too late. The Germans jumped into the trench.

There is a moment in each battle which decides its outcome. The lieutenant understood that such a moment had come. Now and not a second later he must do something, say something that would make this handful of tired, hungry, deafened and wounded men perform a miracle. Throwing himself over the parapet into the trench where the Germans were already preparing to shoot, he shouted in a voice that sounded strange even to himself:

"Stalin!"

He said nothing more. He had no time. . . . Something heavy hit him in the chest, seared his face. . . . Everything swayed, the earth reeled and reared up on end. . . . To keep from falling into the bottomless pit which suddenly yawned before him, the lieutenant pressed his body hard against the damp clay and dug his nails into it. . . .

He recovered consciousness in the demolished blindage. The lean face of Fadeyev with its high cheekbones bent over him, as calm as ever.

"Are you alive, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Did you repel the attack?"

"That one and two more. We're holding on. You lie still, don't get up, you mustn't. Just a minute."

For some reason Fadeyev tiptoed out of the ruined blindage. Through the mangled logs the lieutenant caught a glimpse of blue depths of evening sky in which screeching martlets flashed.

"The lieutenant is alive," said Fadeyev. "Hey, where you going? Back to your place, blockhead! Don't stick your head up. Pass on the word that the lieutenant is alive. And tell everybody to keep on the alert!"

Everything was bathed in the golden light

emanating from the slanting rays of cool, setting sun. The lieutenant felt a chilly weakness, as though his bones had been taken out and his body stuffed with damp cotton. He glanced at his watch with difficulty. It was 21:50. Some time would yet pass before darkness settled down.

"Fadeyev, Fadeyev," he called, unable to move.

The lieutenant ordered that he be carried out of the blindage and placed where he could see everything around. He chose a wounded soldier to be his messenger and ordered the other men back to the trenches, after which he proceeded to watch the enemy's movements.

He could clearly see the slatelike figures lying stiffly on the slopes and in the grass at the foot of the hill. It seemed as though during this day the swampy field had become covered with grey mole mounds. He began to count them, losing count after he reached a hundred because of the buzzing in his head and the coloured dots flashing and reeling before his eyes.

He took up a handful of clay, already damp from evening dew, and squeezed it in his weakening fingers, showing it to his wounded liaison man—that same pale, unshaved, pock-

marked private with whom he had spoken before the decisive attack.

"Dear earth. Do you see the price they pay for it?"

"We won't let them have it for any price at all, never!" the soldier guffawed, politely covering his mouth with his hand. "Not going to get this height, they aren't! Have other things to think of! Hear that thunder? Someone's coming to our aid."

On their faces they felt the cool dampness of this August evening, filled with the aroma of earth and grass. And they forgot the pain and the danger as they smiled and listened to the roar of artillery fire approaching from the east.



A Copy of "Pravda"

ALTHOUGH this story sounds like a fairy tale, it is true from the very beginning to the end. I heard it in the woods of the Kholm-Zhirkov-sky District, Smolensk Region, when this area was still occupied by partisans. It was told to me by Nikolai Fyodorovich Somov, a partisan demolition trooper, and his son Yura, formerly a trade-school pupil and now a partisan scout, known in the detachment as "Sunny" because of his round, beaming face and flaming red curls.

"When Fritz had taken Vyazma and was pushing towards Moscow, our Kolkhoz *Orekhovka* and the places around it turned out to be deep in the German rear," said Nikolai Fyodorovich, beginning his story.

"About three hundred kilometres from the front," specified Yurka, a practical lad who liked precision in everything.



“That’s right, but don’t interrupt. . . . Got-ten into the habit of poking his nose into grownups’ conversation,” the father remarked, frowning at him. “Well, we didn’t lose our heads, and soon a partisan unit commanded by Comrade M., I won’t mention his name, you know him anyway, appeared in the woods near Orekhovka. We began with almost nothing so to say: one rifle to five men, and that without cartridges, a crate of hand grenades and incendiary bottles. Soon, however, we feathered our nests with weapons and other equipment, all captured in battle. We even seized a German radio set.

“We had a fellow in our partisan outfit named Sanka, who had been a film operator in our district—a clever lad. He quickly caught on to how the radio worked, monkeyed around for awhile and repaired it. ‘Now, fellas,’ he said, ‘we’re no longer deaf; we’ll listen to Moscow. . . .’ Only a person who has fought in the woods knows what a radio means. A great thing! He put on the earphones and all the fellows gathered around, stretching their necks like geese. We could hardly wait to find out where the Red Army was fighting now, what was happening on the Mainland, and what was what in Moscow. This took place in October, I remember it as clearly

as though it had happened yesterday. In the mornings, the fields used to be white with frost and the swamps were already freezing."

"Not in October, but the end of October," amended Yurka.

"What would you do with a kid like that? How many times you been told not to butt in when your father is speaking? Get out of here!" said Nikolai Fyodorovich, losing his temper. He waited for his son to go out before continuing his story: "Yes, to be sure, it was the end of October, but what's the difference. Well, to make a long story short, the crowd of us was standing around the radio—everybody except the sentries, of course. Suddenly, Sanka got up, pale, his lips trembling like he had been hit on the head with the butt of a rifle. 'Moscow, fellas,' he says, and without finishing, sat down on a mound, covered his face with his hands and burst into tears. He was a big husky fellow and God, it's awful when such a guy suddenly bursts into tears. Well, all of us stood around silentlike. The commander shook Sanka by the shoulders. 'You're lying! Perhaps you misunderstood. . . . Well, answer, answer us!' 'It's the truth,' he answered. 'The broadcast is coming from Kuibyshev. They said Moscow and Leningrad

have surrendered and that the city of Gorky is holding on by a thread and that the Red Army is retreating according to plan to the Urals'. The commander said: 'You're lying, I want to listen myself.' He sat down beside the radio, and as always happens with radios, just at the vital moment a crash and a bang and nothing could be understood and the broadcast ended.

"I won't try to describe what we lived through that day. Everybody looked as if he had just buried his mother. Such news was no joke!

"In the evening when it was time for the latest news broadcast, the commander said to Sanka: 'Tune in your machine and then get the hell out.' He put on the earphones himself. He listened for a while, then got up without saying a word or looking at anybody and we all understood: things was in a bad way.

"Meanwhile the Germans had put up posters addressed to the partisans saying something like: 'You're fighting for nothing, Moscow and Leningrad have fallen, Gorky and Ivanovo are in German hands, the rest of the Red Army is retreating beyond the Urals, your cause is lost, so put down your weapons and come out of the forests—nothing will happen to you.' Of course no one wanted to believe

them. How could we ever believe that the Red Army had been smashed! And now this broadcast from Kuibyshev....”

“Not from Kuibyshev but from Königsberg,” impatiently interrupted Yurka who had unnoticeably slipped in and was standing behind his father.

“True enough, but we found that out later. At that time it never entered our heads that the Germans were pulling our leg. The hours were the same and the voices of the announcers seemed familiar. Hm.... Well, such news made us feel as though we was sitting with a sword hanging over our heads. About this time one of our kolkhoz women, a widow named Katerina Vlassyevna Zharinova, went out into the yard to hang out her wash. She went out and what does she see: there on the snow was a newspaper. She unfolded it. It looked familiar. It was the *Pravda*. And the photograph on the front page showed the Lenin Mausoleum with Comrade Stalin on the reviewing stand along with Comrades Molotov, Zhdanov, Mikoyan, Voroshilov and others.... And the newspaper a fresh one. What did this mean? She glanced at the date. November 8!

“She grabbed up the newspaper, rushed into the house, and showed it to her daughter:

Read it, daughter! Hurry up, what does it say?' The daughter read, and could hardly believe her eyes: a parade in Moscow. Comrade Stalin had made a speech. The invaders' days were numbered, he had said. A neighbour dropped in to borrow a frying pan or some such thing. Again they read it through. In the evening the whole kolkhoz flocked to the house. Comrade Stalin's speech was read about ten times. The newspaper was passed around. The people looked at it as though it was something sacred, honest to God. It was something real, something ordinary, something dearly familiar. It's impossible to describe how happy people felt. That night a messenger came running to us from the village. Sweating bullets, wet as a rat, he cried, 'Good news, fellows! One of the women has found a recent copy of *Pravda*! Comrade Stalin has made a speech in the Red Square! We're going to send the Germans straight to hell! There was a tank parade in Moscow!' And all such things.

"Well, we felt as if a heavy load had been lifted off our shoulders. We sent for this newspaper, brought it to the detachment, built a huge bonfire, and collected all the people around it. All night long the newspaper was read aloud. We'd just get through reading to one group when new ones would come, and

we'd begin all over again. And the new ones listened and the old ones remained. You see the German radio had made us sick. We had a terrific yearning to know the truth.

"Those who was younger, whose memory was fresher, learned Comrade Stalin's speech by heart, it was read so many times that night. Here, my Yurka can recite it to you, word for word even now, only ask him... all right, don't bother, they'll believe you without it. He'd be only too glad....

"Well, anyway, the news of the *Pravda* travelled far and wide. Even distant villages began sending messengers secretly, some of them trudging more than a hundred miles to read this newspaper. Comrade Stalin's speech was copied into notebooks. The words, 'It's a lie,' were written with charcoal across German posters with their falsehoods.

"People took heart. They knew our Soviet Government couldn't be overthrown. And affairs in our partisan outfit picked up. People came to us in flocks. We began selecting our people, and took only those who had their own guns.

"The Germans became alarmed: What was the matter? What had happened? There was one rat among us: Pyotr Pavlov, the biggest

crook in the whole district. We finished him off later in a partisan court. Well, he betrayed Zharinova. He said she had a newspaper that stirred people up. Well, the German police came in a truck—about fifteen of them with machine guns. They broke into Zharinova's home. Where's the newspaper? Hand over the newspaper. Katerina stood before them as white as a sheet: 'I don't know what you are talking about, I don't know anything about any newspaper.' They asked her: 'Why do all the people from the district come to visit you?' But Katerina kept her wits about her! 'I gather medicinal herbs; you chased away all the doctors so I treat the sick,' she said.

"She lied well, but they didn't believe her. Most likely Pyotr Pavlov had given them all the dope. It was clear that this newspaper worried the Hitlerites, hm-m.... They tortured Katerina for a long time. They twisted her arms and pulled her hair out in bunches by the roots—what else could you expect of fascists! She cried, but didn't give anything away. 'Go ahead and kill me, but I don't know a thing.' They took her out into the garden. 'Tell us where the newspaper is or we'll set your house on fire.' Katerina de-

nied everything: 'Go ahead and burn it, but I don't know anything.' "

Nikolai Fyodorovich's voice trembled and broke. The partisan turned his back and pretended that *makhorka* smoke was choking him and began rubbing his eyes.

"God damn this *makhorka*, it burns the throat like vinegar!... Well, they burned her house and then shot her. But the women had hidden the newspaper under a special stone in the garden near the willow. Zharinova's daughter, also Katya—she's a member of our unit now, a nurse; I can call her in if you like—well anyway, she went into the garden at night, took the newspaper from underneath the stone and brought it to us.

"And again the *Pravda* passed from hand to hand. The newspaper became worn and torn from so much handling. We pasted the corners and folds with paper and continued reading it at the kolkhozes.

"And it goes without saying our partisan unit continued to grow. The Germans mustered all their troops to Moscow because things were going bad for them there and only old men and all sorts of leftovers remained in the village garrisons. One fine day we attacked these garrisons, killed them all off, cleaned up our district, and organized this so-called Parti-

sanland where Fritz wouldn't dare stick his nose without tanks. Well, you know all this without me telling you.

"But about the newspaper. Our commander hid it. 'I'm going to keep it,' he said, 'because it's a historical document. We'll defeat the Germans,' he said, 'and we'll hang up this newspaper in some important museum. Let our descendants see what kind of newspapers we had during the war,' he said."

"Well, where is the newspaper?"

"That's the question. Our commander guarded it like the apple of his eye. He had been a Party secretary before the war and he understood such things. Once, however, the commander from the neighbouring district sent his scout to us with a note, 'Send us the newspaper. It's only a historical document for you because you have already freed yourselves, but we,' he wrote, 'are still under the Germans; for us it will be a weapon.' Well, there was nothing we could do about it; we gave him the newspaper in return for a receipt, and again it began making the rounds."

"And where is it now?"

Nikolai Fyodorovich lifted his large, knotted, veiny hands, the hands of a kolkhoz smith, still black from metal burns and smoke even after so much time in these woods.

"I don't know where it is. We lost track of it. Now the district where the commander operates who took it from us has also been liberated, is also Partisanland. I was sent there to repair a field gun they had captured; well, our commander said to me: 'Bring back the newspaper,' he said, 'I must send it to the Mainland.' So when I got there I asked: 'Where's the newspaper? Fork it over.' But one of their comrades said: 'Fine time to ask for it. Last December the boys near Minsk came and asked for it and we gave it to them.' "

Nikolai Fyodorovich grinned, showing his strong, white teeth. Lighted by a smile, his face at once became younger.

"They began making up legends about that newspaper. Believe it or not! It's said that the Germans threw it into the fire, but it wouldn't burn; they threw it into the river, but it wouldn't sink; they got angry, crumpled it up and put it into a shell and fired the shell, but instead of destroying the paper, the shell burst into a million new copies!"

"Bunk!" interrupted Yurka, solemnly. "Old wives' tales!"

Nikolai Fyodorovich smiled good-naturedly as he looked at his son, a small, sturdy, lively lad, tightly belted with a red leather belt, probably taken off some German officer's body.

"No, it's not the bunk. Aren't we connected with the Mainland now? And don't we get *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and other newspapers and even mail from there every week? And don't we learn all the news, even if it is two weeks late? All about how you live over there, what you're doing, how our beloved Allies are scratching their heads on the other side of the Channel, and how the Red Army is advancing and crushing the Germans on all fronts."

The partisan gave his son a swift, affectionate push. The boy reeled, but quickly regained his balance.

"Well: what do you say? Isn't it so? 'Old wives' tales' indeed! Have to understand a tale when you hear it, smarty!"



Scouts

ONCE during the very height of the war, an interesting dispute took place between Nikolai Ilyich Cherednikov, a veteran soldier, and Valentin Utkin, a lucky sniper who, though still very young, had seen a lot of fighting. These two were favourites in a scout company famous along the whole Kalinin front, commanded as I remember now, by Captain Kuzmin.

Cherednikov, who always had a patronizing and rather supercilious attitude towards youth, asserted in the blindage before the whole unit that he could camouflage himself so that Utkin would not be able to detect him even at a range of only ten metres, and knowing that he was somewhere close by. Utkin, an experienced fellow, with every reason to be self-confident, announced that this was a

"lot of bosh." He who had ambushed up to fifty Germans and could spot a fly fifteen metres away, most certainly could see a man, especially one with the proportions of Uncle Cherednikov, as Nikolai Ilyich was called in the company.

The forfeit was a tobacco pouch.

Sergeant Zverev, the company's "bread and butter man," a just and respected fellow, was asked to act as judge.

At an hour when the company was resting, having been transferred to the regiment's rear echelon after heavy fighting, the sergeant solemnly called Utkin and led him away. Sent off with spicy jokes and wishes of good luck, they walked through the back yards of the village where the company was stationed, and crossed unploughed fields overgrown with weeds and fenced off by a demolished hedge. They stopped at the bend in the village lane where it curved to enter a sparse young birch grove.

"Stand here and look sharp," said the sergeant, noting the time on his watch and wondering as he glanced around where on earth Uncle Cherednikov could be hiding here.

It was a wet, dreary, windy day. Shapeless dark clouds sailed over the wet fields and for-

est, almost touching the pale fluttering leaves of the treetops. Large drops hung on the shiny branches of the bushes. The raw air penetrated to the very marrow. But in spite of the weather, somewhere high up in the sky the larks were singing over the gloomy, brown fields, reminding the world that it was early spring and not fall.

Utkin looked around attentively. The country was flat and it was impossible to hide anywhere except, perhaps, among the trees at the edge of the field. He began to scrutinize it, studying every birch, mound and bush with the sharp, patient eye of a scout. It would seem to him that the grass had been trampled in one spot, or that a certain clump of moss was unnaturally high, or that a stick in the swamp, with both ends sticking out, had been pressed down by a human foot. The scout was on the *qui vive*, eager to call out to Uncle Cherednikov that he had found his friend, but on taking another look, he would discover that he was mistaken. Then he would begin examining the locality again with still greater care.

The sergeant sat smoking on a large pile of stones nearby and also looked around with curiosity. The incessant rain had covered the grass with a silvery grey coating like dew. Every

footprint should have been visible. But none could be seen, and this, more than anything else, confused both of them.

By the end of the half hour set for the search, Utkin had lost his temper. It seemed to him that the old scout had played a trick on him and was sitting as usual, somewhere near the bonfire, throwing on dry twigs, dreamily watching the fire dancing and crackling, while he laughed up his sleeve at the gullible ones.

"The old devil's played a joke on us!" said Utkin irritably. "Let's go, what's the use of staring into space. It's enough to make a cat laugh!"

As he said this a familiar hoarse voice came from somewhere right beside him, as if out of the earth:

"Look more carefully . . . don't be so impatient. Don't spare your eyes. Remember how you used to boast—'No fooling ME, can't hide from ME. . . .'"

The stones rolled and clattered and from the heap two paces away, so close that Utkin had not even paid any attention to it, emerged the tall round-shouldered figure of the old scout, shaking himself and shivering from the dampness. His drooping, tobacco-stained moustache was now wet with rain.

He tugged at his tunic, with rapid movements of his large hands pulling the gathers under the belt to the back. He adjusted his forage cap, slung his rifle over his shoulder and stepped up to Utkin, who stood open-mouthed as if frozen to the spot. He held out his hand:

“Let’s have the pouch.”

Utkin silently pulled out his blue silk pouch with the words “To a Hero of the Great Patriotic War” embroidered in satin stitch. It was a cherished pouch, received as a May Day gift, the envy of the whole company. He looked at it regretfully and handed it to Uncle Cherednikov. The latter took it without the slightest hesitation, filled his small homemade pipe with tobacco from it, blew a couple of smoke rings, carefully tied up the pouch and put it into his own pocket.

“I know you feel bad about it, but I’ll not be giving it back to you. See that there are no more senseless arguments with old Nikolai Cherednikov and don’t try teaching your grandmother how to suck eggs. Is that clear, Private Utkin?”

There was a long story attached to this tobacco pouch and the whole company knew it. On receiving the gift, Valentin Utkin had found a note inside: “Have a good smoke and think of me”—or something to that effect. It

was signed and bore the address: "*Proletarka* Weaving Mill, City of Kalinin." By this time not only an exchange of letters had ensued, but a whole love story. So the whole company was surprised that Uncle Cherednikov, a good-natured, just man, a Communist who was ever ready to give away anything he had to a comrade, should have deprived the company favourite of such a treasured token.

Nevertheless, the dispute raised Uncle Cherednikov's prestige still higher, and from that time on no matter what the old scout said about their work, no one risked arguing with him. At times even Captain Kuzmin called Uncle Cherednikov and asked his advice.

A scout! You most likely imagine a scout as a bold fellow with a lively, energetic face, sharp eyes and a tommy gun slung across his chest. But Uncle Cherednikov, as you already know, was a man well on in years, tall, round-shouldered, slow, and while not exactly close-mouthed, he preferred listening to talking. When listening, he would never take the crooked little pipe he had carved from a bit of birchwood out of his mouth.

He preferred an ordinary Russian three-linear rifle to a tommy gun. Nevertheless, he was a scout and a sniper, unsurpassed on our front, with the true talent of a pathfinder, with

his own peculiar ways, the cunning of a fox, and inexhaustible inventiveness.

This Siberian kolkhoznik, inhabitant of the taiga, descendant of many generations of Russian hunters, approached war with calm calculation and efficiency. He used to say that since the fascists had broken into our house, he looked upon them as beasts rather than men, and fierce beasts at that—bloodthirsty wildcats, more thievish and harmful than wolves. He hunted them continuously and untiringly, not only during days of fighting but also during rare hours of leisure, when his company was moved back to the rear for a rest.

In contrast to other soldiers of those days, he kept no record of the Germans he killed. But his friends gave the Guardsman's word of honour that Uncle Cherednikov had "popped off" close on to a hundred. He himself claimed, and I think sincerely, that he attached no particular importance to this—"nothing much to boast of—knocking off a gaping Fritz!" was his attitude.

However, as a hunter recalls the bears he has killed, so Uncle Cherednikov remembered three of the Germans he had wiped out: two officers whom he had spotted as he lay in no man's land and shot while they were recon-

noitring, and the third "arch fiend" of a German sniper, as he called him, who had killed several of our soldiers and wounded the scouts' pet—the dog Adolph, a shaggy, noisy mongrel that used to run along the front line with a German iron cross around its neck.

Uncle Cherednikov hunted this sniper for about two weeks. The sniper knew he was being tracked, and in his turn tried to get the old scout. As though competing for a championship, they watched for each other days on end. The captain had given orders to get rid of the "arch fiend" and Cherednikov decided to "fight to a victorious end." He used to show up in those days only long enough to get a new supply of rusks, tinned food and tobacco from the sergeant, and fill his flask with spirits to protect him from the severe January cold. He would come to the camp thin, unshaved, irritable, with bloodshot eyes and chewed moustaches. Answering no questions, he would doze off for a couple of hours in the corner of the dugout, and then be off again to the front line.

Not until the end of the second week did he discover the snowy lair of the German sniper. It was dug behind the carcass of a horse which had been lying there since fall, horribly bloated and already snowed under.

Uncle Cherednikov tried to entice the enemy into battle by shooting into the air. The sniper did not answer, but the Germans opened such fire from their positions that Uncle Cherednikov barely escaped with his life.

He tried setting up a dummy in the forest dressed in a helmet and coveralls. There was nothing new about such a ruse, but it often served the purpose. The "fiend" did not bite and the day was wasted.

Then once on a foggy night just before dawn, Uncle Cherednikov made some tracks to a lone pine tree just opposite the dead horse. He shook down the hoarfrost from the branches and threw some bark on the snow. He placed his coverall near it so that it was barely discernible. All this he camouflaged rather carelessly. He stretched a white string from the pine to his real hideout in the snow and allowed it all to become covered with the hoarfrost which settled with the morning mist.

When day had dawned and the sun had risen, he began to jerk the string gently. The snow fell slowly from the pine branches. He'd jerk and then lie quiet for half an hour. Again he would jerk and lie still. Finally something stirred in the German sniper's lair. Something whiter than the snowy horizon appeared over

the horse's brown belly. A shot. It merged with Uncle Cherednikov's firing. Then silence. The only sign of life was the snow which fluttered down as the shot hit the pine branch under which the scout had so carefully placed and camouflaged his coverall.

From that day on the "arch fiend" ceased to trouble our soldiers, and Adolph, the dog, who had been gradually brought back to health by the scouts, could now run along the front line jingling his iron cross, and disdainfully lifting his leg at a tree stump or a parapet under the very noses of the Germans.

Uncle Cherednikov spent his free time hunting down the enemy, but his real military profession was that of a scout. Our scouts invented many tricks during the Great Patriotic War but I shall not bother telling about them. Uncle Cherednikov preferred noiseless scouting based on subtlety, on knowing the habits of the enemy and on skilful camouflage.

He and his partner, the same Valentin Utkin from whom he had so mercilessly taken the cherished pouch, crawled like lizards to the enemy's positions and took note of what was needed. When circumstances demanded they would knock out a gaping sentry with

cold steel and always return quietly, without a shot.

Scouting was not a profession but an art for Cherednikov. He loved it like an artist, and like an artist he willingly, persistently, and patiently taught the young people sent from the reserve regiments. But he taught them not with words. He did not like words. He showed the young soldiers how to crawl, how to wrap their boots in felt to make their steps noiseless, how to tell the cardinal points of the compass by the moss on the trees and by the annual rings on stumps; how to climb tall, branchless pine trees with the aid of a leather belt; how to lead a dog off the track, how to protect oneself from cold in the snow; how to tell the distance of the enemy's position by the time difference between the shooting of a shell and its explosion, the position of a firing battery by the tone of the shot, and much more that was essential in this complicated military profession. He showed the young soldiers his famous camouflage coverall to which he himself had sewn twigs and bark so that it could not be detected two metres away.

"The fascist is a cunning beast, frightened and on the alert. He must be taken craftily, and because of this, we have to work on tip-toe," he told the young soldiers.

He was guided by this principle himself and was so expert that sometimes he unwittingly fooled his own men.

Once the whole detachment almost wept his loss.

The commander ordered him to capture a "tongue."* Information had been received that the enemy was planning a new operation, and the order was given to capture a German tongue as soon as possible. Uncle Cherednikov listened to the orders silently. To the question: "Do you understand?" he blurted out as usual:

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

He made a full turn to the left, took only his gun, leaving even his famous coverall behind, and went to the front line. He did not say anything to anyone, not even to his friend Valentin Utkin.

A tongue was badly needed. Therefore, without waiting for nightfall, Uncle Cherednikov crossed the defence lines and began crawling towards the German trenches, burrowing so skilfully in the snow that the comrades following his movements soon lost sight of him. But something went wrong when he was only about twenty paces away from the

* A prisoner from whom necessary information can be obtained.—*Tr.*

enemy. He suddenly raised himself slightly. The soldiers heard the Germans fire a couple of bursts from tommy guns. They saw the scout fall backwards with arms widespread. Then complete silence. In the deepening dusk the immobile body with the hand upraised could be distinguished lying in the spot where it had fallen.

The Germans tried to creep up to the body, but our soldiers immediately opened fire and forced them back. The news that Uncle Cherednikov had been killed quickly reached the company. White as a sheet, Utkin ran out in his camouflage coverall, looked at the motionless body with the upraised hand, and immediately crawled over the parapet. The others barely held him back, and he would have crawled out to his friend and perhaps been killed if the captain himself had not ordered him to wait until dark.

All evening Utkin sat with the soldiers from the outposts and drank spirits from a flask, openly wiping the tears from his cheeks and asserting the while:

“What a man! What a man! You don’t realize what a man Uncle Cherednikov was!...”

When darkness deepened and snow whirled over the fields, the captain permitted him to

go for the body of his friend. Utkin jumped over the parapet, went through the entanglements and moved forward. For a long time he crawled on his elbows over the slippery crust.... Then suddenly through the rustle of flying snow he heard someone's heavy, muffled breathing. Someone was crawling towards him. Utkin stopped stone dead, silently pulled out his knife and waited. Suddenly he heard a familiar husky whisper:

"Who's there? Don't shoot, it's a friend. Password—'Trench mortar.' Why are you so quiet, do you think I don't hear you? You don't dig yourself in deep enough, your backside sticks out. Well, come help me!"

It seems that Uncle Cherednikov, realizing the importance of the task, decided to risk everything. He figured this way: he would crawl unnoticed close to the German trenches, then show himself on purpose, fall when they shot, make believe he was dead and wait until dark. One of the Germans would come for his body. He would attack this German and seize him.

The general who commanded the division was so pleased with Cherednikov's "tongue," that he himself decorated him with the medal For Valour for past exploits and with the Order of the Red Star for this one.

What a celebration was held! Having had more to drink than the established army ration, the untalkative Cherednikov opened up. He returned the cherished pouch to Valentin Utkin with a warning not to lift his nose too high in the presence of old veterans. He then began telling his comrades how, when just a rookie, he had participated in the Brusilov offensive in 1916, how the Germans had then fled under Russian blows through Galicia and how he, Cherednikov, had volunteered to penetrate enemy lines with a party of scouts. With his own hands he had captured an Austrian captain, disarmed him and brought him to headquarters, for which he had received his first decoration, the St. George Cross. He told how the Germans had retreated before the Red Army in the Ukraine in 1918 and how the Red regiments had pursued the Germans at their very heels. Cherednikov had again crossed the German lines with a group of scouts, this time seizing staff vehicles, the regiment's cash box, some very important documents, and an automobile loaded with Christmas presents. For this, the division commander had presented Cherednikov with a silver watch.

The old scout pulled out a heavy watch on which were engraved two crossed rifles and the

words: "For outstanding courage, valour and zeal." The watch was passed around, and when it was returned to the owner, he looked at it pensively:

"Oh, how fast the Germans ran away from us then, my lads! Ninety miles an hour, hanging on to their ears to keep from losing them! And they'll be running soon again, you just take Uncle Cherednikov's word for it! Who were we in those days? What were we? And look at us now! What are we like now, I ask you? We didn't chase them to Berlin then—didn't have the strength. But now, boys, you can be sure I won't return home until I've lighted my pipe in Berlin. Perhaps you think I'm boasting? Let anyone try to say that I'm boasting!"

But no one said he was boasting, although this old veteran spoke these words when our troops were still storming Velikiye Luki and Berlin was still far away.



Her Family

WITH short shuffling steps, a small, stooped, old woman, very energetic for her sixty years, came into the office of the Chairman of the Nelidovo Village Soviet, a room in one of the few buildings that remained standing after the expulsion of the Germans. The thick locks escaping from beneath her beret were snow white, but her large, beautiful black eyes were young, and their vitality offered a strange contrast to her silvery hair.

For a moment she studied the tired face of the chairman and then, as if having decided that he was a worthy person and one with whom it was possible to have a heart-to-heart talk, she asked:

“Have you ever been to Toropets? No? Too bad. If you had been in Toropets before the war, you most certainly would have known

my husband. My name is Sarah Markovna—Sarah Markovna Feinstein. I'm the wife of Gershel Feinstein, the best men's tailor in Toropets and the mother of three sons who are now in the Red Army fighting the Germans. May all good people be blessed with such sons!"

She sat sideways on the edge of the luxurious armchair proffered her. How this chair had found its way into this bleak room, with its dark log walls, was a mystery. She fingered the fringe of her black shawl with long thin fingers and continued:

"Only please don't think I have come to ask help as the mother of three soldiers. Oh no, I wouldn't think of doing such a thing! But I have come a long distance on very important business. Do you hear me? For three days I travelled from Toropets, jouncing in trucks along rutted roads. May Hitler be made to ride along such roads to his dying day! Do you hear? I came to tell you what remarkable people live in your district.... No, no, don't be afraid, I won't keep you long.... This doesn't concern me alone. God knows I would never have made such a trip if the matter concerned only me! But you're the head of the district and you have a right to know what worthy people you preside over. Do you know the Kolkhoz *Budyonny*, the one on the

Toropets highway? Do you know it, I'm asking? Why don't you say something—'yes' or 'no'?"

"Yes, I do," answered the chairman in a strangely muffled voice, barely suppressing a smile.

The chairman had headed a partisan unit in the woods of these parts for about a year during the German occupation of the district. They had been forced to live only in the woods because in turning the region into a "dead zone," the enemy had burnt all the villages except those located along the highway. During the year he had spent in the dense forests, in dugouts, around campfires, the chairman had lost the habit of living in buildings, and now had difficulty in regulating his powerful ringing bass to fit the small office. For that reason he always felt embarrassed when speaking to strangers.

"So you do know it. Very good. Now listen to me and listen carefully, while I tell you something that will stir you, as head of the district, to the depths of your soul."

With nervous haste the old woman began telling what she had lived through and seen in this region during the horrible days of German occupation.

On the first day of the war, Sarah Markovna had seen her youngest son off to the military commissariat. Soon the eldest had followed his brother, leaving his wife Hannah in the care of the old folks. The third son was a military man by profession and was already fighting somewhere in Byelorussia.

When the Germans broke through to the Nyeman River and Toropets was declared to be in a state of siege, old Gershel armed himself with a rusty spade and a change of underwear and went to join a workers' battalion building a line of fortifications near the city.

"Don't worry, Sarah, the main thing is—no panic. We won't let them get any closer than the old borders," he said taking his leave. "And if a few stray ones slip through here and there, they'll be held up at our trenches. Do you know what kind of trenches these will be? Oho-o!" and he solemnly waved the rusty spade in front of his wife's tear-stained face.

But the Germans broke through the old borders. Nor did the new fortifications in this district stop them. And then a stream of refugees began flowing east along the Toropets highway; a stream of silent, depressed people driving trucks and carts loaded with household goods, and herds of dusty tired cattle; a

stream which brought from the invaded territory in the west vague rumours of the innumerable forces and the fierceness of the advancing enemy; a stream which swept along the family of the Toropets tailor.

Leaving everything behind, without even locking the apartment, Sarah Markovna left the city early one morning with her daughter Raya and daughter-in-law Hannah. The two younger women took the old lady under the arms and carried her bundle.

This was in the days when fascism was revelling in victory. The Berlin radio incessantly played marches and made hourly announcements of newly captured villages and cities. Fascist fliers amused themselves by diving down on the human stream flowing along all the roads to the east, to the interior of the country. They practised precision bombing by aiming at the refugees. Fighter planes with black crosses on their wings strafed the defenceless crowds, showering them with bullets from cannons and machine guns.

Such a bullet, fired from a fighter plane, killed Hannah on the Toropets bridge. Her body, together with others, was carried to the river bank and buried in the shade of a willow.

On the next day Raya was killed by a dive bomber. Only a deep smoking crater marked the place where the girl had been standing.

And Sarah Markovna walked on and on, mechanically, numb with grief; she walked without thinking of anything, without understanding anything, except that one must not lag behind this stream of people, that one must move on, on to the east, no matter what happened.

Someone's kind hands lifted her when she fell from fatigue on the hot dusty road. Someone gave her a piece of bread or a potato and, forgetting to thank the giver, she ate without appetite, without even tasting the food. Strange voices called her to campfires at night, and she, the mother of a large family, now all alone, warmed herself at strangers' fires.

On the fourth day she fell ill. She left the road and collapsed on the dusty grass which smelled of tar, gasoline and the sweat of horses. She concluded that she must die here, for she no longer had the strength to move on. Rattling carts rolled past her. The dull perplexed eyes of children looked out from behind dusty bundles. Tired horses foamed at the mouth, wheels creaked, cattle, tortured by heat and dust, bellowed.

The eyes of the people who trudged behind the carts were dry and inflamed and saw nothing. They lugged the remains of their worldly goods on their backs, on bicycles, in handcarts or in baby carriages. Their black lips were tightly compressed. Sarah Markovna closed her eyes. She knew that each one of them had enough cares of his own, without bothering about those of other people. She did not ask for help. But there were people who carried her, sick as she was, to the first cottage in the nearest village.

"The house is full of our own trouble, and they have to bring a stranger," she heard someone say in an unfriendly voice. "The house is full of our own people, and here, if you please.... All right, put her there—over there—what are you waiting for? Oh dear! Oh dear!"

Sarah Markovna did not know who said these words. She did not have the strength to open her eyes, which seemed to be glued together.

She came to only on the next day and looked around in surprise, not realizing where she was.

She was lying on a bench in a spacious peasant cottage. Bright rays of midday sun broke through the greyish leaves of the ge-

raniums on the window sill. The oven crackled as it warmed up. Flies buzzed over the table set with spoons, bread, and a steaming bowl of cabbage soup that no one had yet touched.

A tall, lean, middle-aged woman with three children hanging on to her skirts was looking out of the window into the street, from which came the rumble and thunder and purring of motors and the throaty sounds of strange speech.

"What will happen to us, my dear children, what will happen? What will we do now?..." repeated the woman looking out into the street.

Without quite understanding what had actually taken place, Sarah Markovna realized that it was something terrible, and she uttered a plaintive cry. The woman looked at her with eyes as dry and sad as those of the refugees.

"Ah, so you have come to? Alas, my dear, it would have been better if..." She did not finish, and again gazed out of the window, through which the wild howling and clanking came in waves, sometimes so strong that the walls shook and the windows rattled, sometimes abating and dying away completely. After a moment's silence she added: "The Germans are here!"

Sarah Markovna threw off the old patchwork quilt with which she had been covered and jumped to her feet, reeling and leaning against the wall for support.

"I'm going, I can't stay here, I'm going," she said.

The woman of the house gave her a hard, withering glance and waved her hand:

"Where are you going? Lie down. There's no escaping fate."

Through Sarah Markovna's mind flashed the terrible tales told by the refugees about fascist atrocities against the Jews. She recalled how in the small town of Sebezh, the Jews had been assembled in the local synagogue as though to be registered. The doors had been locked and barred with logs and the old wooden building set on fire. She remembered how in Nevel, Jewish families had been herded onto a narrow sandy strip of land projecting out into a lake. Tanks had then been sent charging along this strip, so that the waters of the lake, famous for their transparency, ran scarlet with human blood.

No, she had not the right to bring trouble to this family who had by chance taken her in. She could not. She must not remain here.

"I'm going. Let me. I'm going," she said, getting up. "I'm not afraid of death; I've lived

my life. I've brought up my children, but you have three small ones. I don't want others to die because of me...."

"Do you know what answer I received from this kolkhoz woman, Yekaterina Fyodorovna Yevstigneyeva?" asked the old woman of the district Soviet chairman as she wiped the tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks.

"Please write down her name in your notebook: Yekaterina Fyodorovna Yevstigneyeva from the Kolkhoz *Budyonny*. You just listen to what she said to me. She told me that I was an old fool; yes, yes, an old fool; that I had lost my mind if I thought that she, a kolkhoz woman, would throw a human being to wild beasts in order to save her own skin.... She told me that the Soviet Government must have brought me up badly if I could think that of her. She ordered me to lie down, to keep quiet, and not to talk nonsense! That's the kind of person Yekaterina Fyodorovna is! There she was with her three children and no husband, and the fascists in her back yard—not somewhere in Germany. They were driving their tanks right under her very windows. She and I heard them guffawing near the well where they were filling their radiators. But that's not all. You're the head of the

district, and it's your business to know what your people are like, so please have the patience to listen to the end and see what happened."

On the insistence of the woman of the house to which Sarah Markovna had been brought, she remained at the Kolkhoz *Budyonny*, though this organization had been declared abolished by the *Feldkommandant* of all the villages along the highway.

The woman gave her an old worn-out peasant dress, and made her lie on the bunk on top of the oven. Then, after consulting with her neighbours, she decided to tell the German soldiers from the *Kommandantur* who came to search the huts and rummage through the peasants' trunks that a woman sick with typhus was lying on the oven. The Germans, fearing infection, not only left the old woman alone, but in general avoided Yevstigneyeva's house.

Sarah Markovna lived like this until winter, without leaving the house. When the Germans drove the inhabitants to clear the roads during blizzards, showing no consideration for the small children left behind, the kolkhozniks brought their children to Yevstigneyeva's house and Sarah Markovna took care of them until they returned. Gradually the women

got used to her, and even became attached to her. In order to avoid using her name, they called her "Mama."

Then the usual notice appeared on the wall of the fire house stating that all Jews must immediately register at the nearest *Kommandantur*. Likewise, people who housed Jews or knew where they lived must report to the same place within twenty-four hours, on penalty of death.

When she heard of the order, Sarah Markovna decided to register. She dressed and collected her belongings without saying anything to the woman of the house. But at the door she met the women with shovels and pick-axes, returning from roadwork.

"Where are you going?" asked Yekaterina Yevstigneyeva, with a sweeping glance.

Sarah Markovna dropped her eyes and said nothing. Then one of the women guessed:

"Going to register? Ah, my dearies, true enough! Just look at her, putting her neck in the noose this way! Can it be you don't know what they did to the Jews in Toropets?"

"Yes, I know everything!" cried Sarah Markovna. "Let me go, I don't want good people to die because of me."

“Do you know what these women said to me?” asked the old woman getting up out of the armchair and looking excitedly into the tired eyes of the chairman, now glowing with a warm light. “They told me I was crazy, they told me that I wanted to shame their kolkhoz; that if they, because of fear, allowed these savages to harm me, they would not be able to look each other in the eye. And just at this moment another peasant came in; they called him by a different name then, but I later learned that his real name was Nikifor Churilin. He did not live in the village at the time. They say he was a partisan. He said, ‘What are you women making so much fuss about?’ And they told him: ‘This crazy fool wants to go to the *Kommandantur*. She’s afraid we’ll get into trouble.’ And do you know what this Nikifor Churilin told them? No, you don’t know. You can’t even guess. You just listen to me.—He said: ‘Don’t worry, Mama, and don’t give a hang about the registration. We’ll weather it through together or we’ll die together.’ That’s what Nikifor Churilin said to me. Please write down his name in your book too. And do you think this is all, Comrade Chairman? No, it’s not all, be patient and let me finish.”

Care for the old woman became the concern of the whole kolkhoz which formally had been abolished but actually had been cemented more closely than ever before by their common trouble. Sarah Markovna continued to live with Yevstigneyeva. Although the occupants had stolen and devoured almost all the food supplies of the inhabitants, even having discovered the secret stores buried in the yards, so that now the entire population lived from hand to mouth, nevertheless the women considered it their duty to share their last crust of bread with the stranger who was their common care.

The Germans continued to avoid Yevstigneyeva's house, for fear of catching the typhus. It seemed that everything was going along smoothly and Sarah Markovna began to believe that with the help of her new friends she would live to see better days. But all of a sudden came a new calamity.

An automobile with a Red Cross on it came to the village. An interpreter asked where the woman with typhus was. In their excitement the inhabitants did not know what to say, and someone sent the doctors to Yevstigneyeva's house. But the doctors did not enter. Instead, an old officer gave instructions to the orderlies, who began pouring gasoline on the foundations. Yevstigneyeva thought the gasoline was

some sort of disinfectant and silently stood in the front yard with her children. Even when one of the Hitlerites set fire to a bunch of straw and threw it against the gasoline-soaked logs, she looked at him without understanding.

The flames engulfed the house in a red sheet of fire, quickly devouring the walls and straw roof. The Germans went to the automobile and drove off. Then the woman screamed and rushed into the house. With her skirt already on fire, she hurried to the oven where her guest was hidden and led her from the roaring flames through the cattle shed, and out the back door....

“And do you know what this woman said who had lost her home and property because of me and was left without shelter with three small children?” asked the old woman of the chairman. “She said: ‘A human being is worth more than a house.’ She said: ‘If the bones are there, the flesh will grow.’ She said: ‘If Soviet power returns, there will be a new house. And if fascist power remains, I won’t need any house or even life itself. Let the devil take everything.’ That’s what she said to me, this same Yekaterina Yevstigneyeva. I beg you to remember this, for you must know what your people are like.”



"I shall remember," boomed the chairman and bent down to look for something in the drawer of his writing desk. When he straightened up his face was red and damp, as if he had suddenly caught cold....

On the day that Yekaterina Yevstigneyeva's house was burned by the Germans, she moved to her sister's, and Sarah Markovna, whom everybody called "Mama," moved from house to house, living in turn with every family, like a shepherd in summertime.

In January the *Feldkommandantur* got wind of the fact that the peasants were sheltering a Jewess. Gestapo men came in automobiles all the way from Nelidovo. A covering detachment was stationed at the village cross-roads, and a thorough search began. While the soldiers searched the houses, two boys, Vasya and Petya Churilin, sons of Nikifor Churilin, led Sarah Markovna through back yards, beyond the edge of the forest to the neighbouring village. There they hid her at the home of their Uncle, Mikhail Churilin, who also did not live in the village and was also rumoured to be in a partisan outfit.

Sarah Markovna lived there more or less uneventfully until the moment when the thunder of a tank battle came to them through

the woods. And then all of a sudden some flushed, perspiring ski soldiers with fur hats on their heads, and dirty snow-camouflage suits on their backs rushed into Churilin's house. They asked for a drink in gay, husky voices, whose accents were pure Russian....

On that same day Sarah Markovna returned to the *Budyonny* Kolkhoz as though she were returning to her own family, and lived there, taking care of children, until her native city was freed. Then a passing ambulance drove her to Toropets.

The whole village came to see her off. Her friends saw that she was dressed warmly, gave her baked potatoes for the trip, and begged her not to forget them.

"How could I ever forget them, Comrade Chairman? Can such people be forgotten? Could I forget them even if, God forbid, I should live to be a hundred? They called me 'Mama' and true enough, I now feel that I have not only three sons who are fighting at the front (may God send all good people such sons!)—I now have dozens of sons and daughters at the *Budyonny* Kolkhoz where I was called 'Mama.' But that is not all. Why do you suppose I jogged along these terrible roads for three days (may Hitler ride along

such roads to his dying day!)? I'll tell you why: I came to say that these people must receive decorations. No, please don't smile. Do you think they don't deserve it? What have you to say?"

The chairman was silent. An expression of great tenderness softened his features, an expression unusual for this rough, courageous man, whose face still bore the tan of his partisan life, except where he had shaved his moustache and beard.

"Yes, Mama, they deserve to be decorated," he said finally. "They deserve it very much indeed; they deserve even more. But the thing is that we can't decorate all Soviet people for being Soviet people."



Friends

WHEN, after a long and difficult march along winter war roads, Kafii Galaulin and Nakhtan-gov Yuldash first reached the fighting line of the Velikiye Luki front, Pyotr Stupin, although only going on twenty-three, was already an experienced soldier with the reputation in his company of being an expert on military affairs.

He had twice fought his way out of encirclement, known the bitterness of retreat, and made a five-hundred kilometre winter march, advancing to the west. Stupin already had three wound stripes and the medal For Valour, and it seemed there was nothing in war that he had not already seen, studied, or lived through.

No matter what war theme the men discussed in the hot dugouts of an evening or in

brushwood shelters during a march, he always found something to tell from his own experience, and he always spoke willingly and interestingly, as is usual with people of experience who are by nature generous and open-hearted.

The company loved this broad-shouldered, stocky private with prominent cheekbones in a thin, windburnt face which bore a derisive expression because of a scar that crossed and lifted one eyebrow. He had become so accustomed to life at the front that he had forgotten all about having once been a tractor driver in the peat fields near Leningrad. War had become his second profession.

In fact Pyotr was so used to this life that he no longer noticed its hardships. The men in his company involuntarily tried to copy his dashing carriage and customary smartness, the clearness with which he reported to his chiefs, his springy step, his manner of cocking his hat, his habit of always being tightly belted and the way he smoothed out his tunic under his belt so that not a single crease remained. When Stupin grew a moustache, there immediately appeared several other moustaches in the company, so that the commander advised Stupin to remove this facial decora-

tion in order to stop the further development of the "Hussar epidemic," as the commander put it.

Half the men in the company were Pyotr Stupin's pals. And the young soldier Kaffi Galaulin (a jolly city man who had until recently been a mechanic in the Kazan fur-dressing mills) was immediately added to the number. This came about very simply. One frosty December day Galaulin sat cleaning his gun near a blindage dug into the steep bank of the small, winding Lovat River. Something had gone wrong with the lock. In spite of the frost, beads of sweat broke out on his grease-stained face.

Stupin happened by, and stopped to watch Galaulin's futile attempts to assemble the gun. Without a word he took it in his hands, and in the twinkling of an eye had it apart and together again.

"See how it's done?" he asked, pleased by his own skill. "You forgot about the frost, friend. The grease thickens in the cold, understand? The same thing happened to me near Klin. We were lying on our bellies waiting for a German attack when all of a sudden I discovered my gun didn't work. Couldn't figure out what was wrong. I tried clicking the lock—wouldn't work. Tried a second time—same thing. I

pushed it this way and that, but nothing would move it. Then a soldier—one of the professional ones next to me in line—said: ‘You dope, the lock has frozen, warm it up inside your coat.’ I warmed it up and what do you think? Everything went fine. It’s a good rifle all right, but it doesn’t like the cold. Keep this in mind, you from Kazan. Got any tobacco? No? Well, all right, we’ll smoke mine. Only there’s nothing much left but dust.”

Stupin sat down beside his new friend and began quietly puffing away, fondling the burnished barrel of the rifle the while and expounding on the gun’s virtues and caprices and the best way to fight with it. Warming up to his topic, he took the gun apart and put it together again, and demonstrated various ways of using it in battle. He did this with such relish that by the end of the talk there was a whole crowd listening at the riverbank, which in those days had come to resemble cave dwellings, or an anthill.

Stupin suddenly came to his senses and hastened to disperse the crowd, fearing that the Germans might spot them and attack them from the air.

It was not in this accidental way that Stupin made friends with Nakhtangov Yul-

dash, a sheep breeder and hunter from the Kazakh steppes, a taciturn man who was no longer young. Nakhtangov had a particularly hard time adjusting himself to frontline life. He had been brought from vast steppelands to a region of forests and lakes in weather so cold that the ice on the river snapped loudly at night; sparrows fell into the snow paralyzed in flight by the cold wind, and spittle froze before it hit the ground. Yes, it was hard for a man who had come from districts where blackouts were unknown, to become accustomed to living in this riverbank dugout from which it was prohibited to emerge without reason because the locality was constantly under enemy cross fire.

And to top off everything he had a poor knowledge of Russian and of the customs and ways of war, besides being shy by nature. In short, Yuldash crept into his shell. And everything went wrong with him; his fingers were all thumbs, and when the squad leader scolded him for poor execution of orders he would only blink and gaze painfully at the strange people and strange scenery.

Apathetic natures are not popular in war. The men began to cast sidelong glances at Yuldash, laugh at him and shun him. This estranged him still more.

Once the sergeant sent several soldiers, headed by Stupin, to the rear for food. Yuldash was sent along at Stupin's request. On the way Stupin tried to talk with him. He had tried this before, considering it the duty of a Communist to help newcomers, but nothing had come of his efforts. Yuldash would murmur only "yes" or "no" and slip back into his shell like a snail.

The road to the rear followed the twists and turns of the river. A sharp, cold wind howled fiercely as it skimmed over the ice.

"The wind is blowing hard. Cover your face, do you understand? Your face. Cover it like this, or it'll freeze; you're not accustomed to the cold," said Stupin to Yuldash, and pulling out a newspaper from his boot, he showed him how to make a paper mask to protect his face from wind and cold.

He then treated him to some tobacco, talked about this and that, and suddenly found out that for three months Yuldash had received no news from his large family. For some reason letters did not reach him and Yuldash himself did not write home because his wife was Russian and could not read Kazakh; he himself could barely write Russian, and was too shy to ask anyone to write for him.

Stupin only shook his head as if to say,

"My dear friend, why have you kept quiet all this time?" While the boxes with dehydrated food and frozen mutton were being loaded at the supply base, Stupin took a sheet of paper, placed it on a box of tea, and said to Yuldash:

"Well, my friend, tell me what to write. I'm a past master at writing letters; half the company exploits me."

At the dictation of Yuldash he wrote a long letter about life at the front—the usual soldier's letter in which all the relatives and friends were mentioned and enquiries were made about the innumerable trifles so dear to a man who is far away from home. It ended in elaborate greetings and best wishes.

Stupin was indeed a great master of the art of letter writing, for when he read his work aloud to Yuldash and the head of the supply base and the clerk who made out the daily food lists, they listened with the greatest attention, each one recalling his own distant dear ones and nodding his head at the most touching places. In order to waste no time, they took the letter to the field post-office on the way home. Thus it left this region of whistling bullets and crackling frosts for a region where the snows had already melted and the apricots were in blossom.

On receiving an answer, Yuldash completely changed: he straightened up and took more care of his appearance, his glance became more cheerful and his eyes no longer had that sleepy look—on the contrary they were very bright and lively—even sly, damn it all! In a word, he was reborn. He grew so fond of Stupin who used to write his letters for him that he tried to stay near him all the time, in or out of battle.

And little by little a strong frontline friendship bound together these three people, so different in type.

When Stupin was sent on scouting missions or to the enemy rear to get a "tongue," he always tried to take along the quick, witty Galaulin and the middle-aged Yuldash who, despite his outward slowness, turned out to be invaluable in such matters, for he was calm and steady as a rock, as well as being an accurate shot, and one who could wait for the enemy for hours without moving a muscle.

They moved into the same corner of the dugout, slept on the same ground sheet, took turns getting each other's bread and vodka rations, ate from one messkit, and kept only their tobacco in separate pouches.

The quality of friendship is tested in diffi-

cult moments. Such a moment came to these friends when Velikiye Luki finally fell as a result of the New Year's drive, and the remnants of the German garrison surrendered.

Their regiment broke through the enemy defence lines and moved rapidly forward in the vanguard of the division. Exploiting the success of the breakthrough, it fought ahead day and night. And suddenly, when the main lines of the German defence had been mangled by our artillery and left far behind, the progress of the regiment through a ravine was impeded by a strong German blockhouse keeping the whole locality under fire.

With the combined efforts of a scouting company and storm platoons, the regiment tried to smash this blockhouse on the march. But the fire of four German machine guns was so skilful and so strong that the attack was frustrated and the vanguard had to retreat. The advance was stopped.

Then the artillery was given the floor. Guns pounded the obstacle for an hour, unsparing of shells. When the brown cloud of frozen earth settled, pieces of splintered logs could be seen in place of the blockhouse. The infantry began an attack. But the wreckage suddenly came to life. The heavy fire of the four machine guns pressed the attackers to

the ground again. Darkness deepened. The minutes began slipping by without action, and only those who have participated in an offensive can truly estimate the value of each minute. One after another came the divisional commander's messengers. The general was in a hurry.

The commander of the regiment himself came to the vanguard company and asked for volunteers to destroy the enemy blockhouse under cover of night.

"Nothing will come of it at night, but in the morning we'll destroy this snag," said Pyotr Stupin.

"Why in the morning?"

"The night will be bright and frosty. And the German is afraid of the dark, so he places lots of sentries around. In the morning he feels more secure, besides which there will be a fog."

"How do you know there will be a fog in the morning?" asked the commander of the regiment. He admitted the correctness of Stupin's conclusions but he wanted very much to get rid of the obstacle and report to the general that the offensive had been renewed.

"Look, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel," said Stupin showing him the sleeve of his great-coat which was grey with hoarfrost.

By morning Stupin had worked out a plan. Galaulin, armed with a tommy gun, must crawl close to the blockhouse from the right, hide carefully behind mounds, dig in and fire at the embrasure in order to attract the attention and fire of the Germans. Meanwhile Stupin and Yuldash, with knives and tommy guns, would creep up to the blockhouse from the rear, unexpectedly rush into the trench from the entrance, knock out the sentry if there was one, and wipe out the garrison with tommy guns.

The plan was a good one and everything went smoothly at first. Galaulin was able to attract the fire of the Germans without much trouble. The other two set out crawling in the snow and were already near the blockhouse when a chance which neither they nor anyone else could have foreseen, interfered. A stray bullet, bounding back with a whistle from a stone, seriously wounded Stupin in the neck. Choking with blood, he lay unconscious in the snow.

When he regained consciousness, Yuldash had tied the wounded man to his belt and was crawling on all fours, carrying him to the rear. For the first time the friends quarrelled.

"Drop me, Yuldash, and go forward. The fog is lifting."

"Shut up, Pyotr, shut up!" gasped Yuldash breathlessly continuing to carry his friend and two tommy guns.

"I'm the commander and I order you to leave me. Carry out orders, Comrade Nakh-tangov. Look how the fog is thinning out."

"You're the commander, Pyotr. Yuldash won't leave his wounded commander; Yuldash will carry out your orders even if there is no fog at all."

He carried his friend to a safe place under a pine, covered him with his greatcoat, and taking his tommy gun, crawled back in nothing but his sleeveless padded vest.

The fog had actually lifted. A clear frosty morning, yellow as a lemon, lighted up the hills which had been pitted by dark mine explosions. The sun was shining brightly. Every blade of grass sticking out from under the snow was clearly visible on the sparkling blue crust. Galaulin continued to distract the attention of the Germans by shooting at them, but it was no longer possible for Yuldash to crawl to the blockhouse unnoticed.

Yuldash began digging a trench through the deep snow with his hands. He dug, pushing the snow backwards with his feet like a mole. And he moved forward in this trench unnoticed, at the pace of about half a metre per

minute. It was a torturous job to dig this caked snow, which crunched and crumbled like corn starch. His hands became numb, his face ached, but Yuldash was stubborn and enduring. Drenched with sweat, his heart pounding in his breast, he dug on and on for an hour, for two hours, three hours—dug until his tunnel bumped into hard earth, which he guessed was the parapet of the German trench.

After taking a brief rest and greedily swallowing a few handfuls of snow, he concluded that, judging by the silence, the trench must be empty. He chose a moment when the firing between Galaulin and the Germans increased, and placing his knife between his teeth, he cocked his tommy gun and, with a quick, cat-like leap, entered the trench and stood still.

Now he understood the secret of the German blockhouse; it was here to these side ditches that the Germans had retired during the artillery barrage.

With a few, cautious jumps, Yuldash passed the communications trenches and came face to face with a sentry. Before the surprised German had time to shout, a knife had been plunged into his chest up to the very hilt. Jumping over the fascist, Yuldash came to the entrance of the damaged blockhouse. In the semidarkness which smelled of gun pow-

der, several figures could be seen scurrying about the embrasures, sending off brief machine-gun volleys. With one hand grenade, Yuldash wiped out the whole machine-gun crew.

Hearing the explosion in the blockhouse, Galaulin immediately guessed what had happened. He grabbed his gun and rushed forward, shooting on the run from his tommy gun for the first time in his life. He reached the blockhouse just in time—a few seconds before the enemy reserves had time to arrive through the tunnels. Now it was easier for the two skilful fighters. They held the Germans at the turn in the trench with tommy-gun fire until Soviet troops arrived and finished them off.

That was how the three friends cleared the way for the advancing regiment.

I met them a few days later in the field hospital where Nakhtangov and Galaulin, having just received the Order of the Red Banner, had come to visit the wounded Stupin. They both sat quietly and sedately beside his cot, their hands on their knees. And before them on a newspaper lay their gifts: cigarettes, sausage, butter, and some white rusks with bits of *makhorka* stuck to them. They had received all this on the previous day, when they had been decorated; and they had

brought all of it, to the last rusk, to their wounded friend. They felt solemn and important. Stupin, on the contrary, who claimed that today his "wound had given him a day off," was in a jolly mood. He crunched at the rusks loudly, tore at the tough sausage with his strong teeth and teased his friends:

"They brought everything but the main thing. And they call themselves pals!"

"The main thing" appetizingly gurgled in Yuldash's aluminium flask. The friends had decided to save the "main thing" until Stupin's recovery, until the triumphant hour when, on leaving the hospital, he would also receive a decoration. It would be a long wait, taking into consideration the seriousness of the wound.

"And you think they won't save it? They will, all right! I'll stake my head on it—they'll save it! That's the kind of fellas they are!" shouted Stupin through the "ward," as this ordinary peasant's house, converted into a hospital, was pompously called.

And every one in the ward—the wounded on their cots, and the old surgeon with his lysol-burnt hands, and the rosy, curly-headed young nurse who reminded one of a Christmas tree ornament—looked at the three friends with a smile.



The Birth of an Epos

IN A SNOW swept ravine close to the front, protected from winds and enemy observers by a low, bushy, pine wood where the advancing battalion had made its brief halt, I witnessed a very curious scene. Three Kazakh soldiers—sturdy, broad-shouldered fellows in baggy greatcoats—had built a campfire near a tree stump uprooted by a shell. They were making themselves some porridge, and while one attended the boiling pot, stirring it with a juniper branch, another threw dry twigs into the fire, and the third, a wrinkled, pock-marked chap well on in years, sat on the stump, his rifle across his knees, pensively watching the fire, which consumed the dry branches with a hiss, a crackle and a howl.

Suddenly he began to sway slowly and wail a long-drawn song of the steppes in a

sharp falsetto, as monotonous as the wind in the treetops. He sang louder and louder, swaying rhythmically and beating time on the butt of his rifle with his fingernails, closing his eyes on the high notes.

"Do you know of whom he is singing? About Major Malik Gabdullin. Have you heard about him? Hero of the Soviet Union. He visited our battalion only a few days ago," explained Lieutenant Klimov, a lanky, sinewy man, with a windburnt face, coarsened by a coat of winter tan, but still youthful and animated. Cocking his head, he listened to the song and began to translate: "He is singing that Malik the Warrior is strong and brave and cunning as a steppe fox; that he has the ear of a mountain goat and can detect the enemy miles away; that he has the eyes of a golden eagle and can see the enemy no matter where he hides; that his hand never tires of killing fascist jackals, and the harder it hits, the greater the strength that flows into it. He sings that just the mere sight of Malik the Warrior makes the Germans flee...."

The song babbled and murmured like a forest spring—quiet, clear and endless. Like a magnet it attracted the Kazakh soldiers and commanders. An attentive, thoughtful

crowd already stood near the bonfire, but the soldier-folk singer was so carried away with his song that he did not notice anyone. A nervous flush covered his round face. Occasionally he would straighten up as if listening to something that rang in the air for him alone, and then he retold this something to the others. The song captivated us, even though we did not understand the words. And the Kazakhs listened with such attention that they did not notice the porridge boil over, hissing in the coals of the dying fire and spreading the appetizing odour of burnt millet.

“He sings about how the people of the steppes love Malik; how his father has become the envy of all fathers; how his mother is revered by all mothers for having borne such a son; how girls dream about him and sing songs about him. He sings that Stalin himself knows Malik, praises Malik, has sent Malik a Gold Star from Moscow; that Malik now goes around the trenches bearing with him Stalin’s words, and soldiers of all nationalities understand his speech because it penetrates to the very heart. He sings that he himself saw Malik and heard Malik, that Malik told them that if they fought well, then eternal songs would be sung about them on their native steppes, such as those now sung

about warriors and heroes of old, like Koblandy and Makhambel."

Suddenly the song broke off on a high note. Tired and self-conscious, the singer fell silent. But it took some time for the charm of his improvisations to vanish, for the crowd to disperse, and for his comrades to become aware of the porridge, the remains of which they suddenly rushed over to save.

"We have had the good fortune of witnessing the birth of a new epos," said Lieutenant Klimov, deeply moved. With a timid smile he admitted that the song reminded him of wonderful prewar days when he had taught literature in one of the Alma-Ata schools and spent his summer vacations travelling over the steppes, recording such songs. "Thus a new epos is born, an epos of the Patriotic War," he added. "Do you know Major Gabdullin?"

I knew Major Gabdullin. I had often met him when putting up for the night on the front line, and from him and his comrades I had learned his biography, a biography which was extremely interesting if in no way fabulous.

Of course, neither Malik's father (an old, illiterate kolkhoz cattle breeder named Gabdulla Elemesov) nor Malik himself (a Soviet

youth, who had risen from a shepherd to a college teacher and well-known folklore scholar in his native land, with several published works to his credit) had ever thought that he, Malik Gabdullin, would become the hero of a Kazakh legend.

At the time war was declared, Malik had just finished writing a thesis for his master's degree. His work was highly praised by his friends at the institute, philologists, and professors of literature. The thesis required only a final stylistic editing before being submitted. But at this time a Communist division was being organized in Alma-Ata, and the finest patriots were joining as volunteers. Malik put aside the thesis on which he had been working for more than two years, came to the District Party Committee, and asked to be taken off the exemption list and sent to the front as a private. Times were hard, so nobody raised any objections. The young scientist received his uniform, messkit, knapsack and a semiautomatic rifle. He was put through a hasty training: the front demanded new forces as quickly as possible.

At the height of the German offensive on Moscow, Gabdullin's division stepped directly from the troop train into the midst of battle and in a frozen trench, unskilfully and hastily

And dug into the steep clay bank of the Rusa River, Malik took his first course in the severe military school which he had entered. The company of which he was the political instructor stretched in platoons along the eastern bank of the river. The platoon in which he had to substitute for the commander who had been killed, was defending the left flank. An order was received stating that the Germans were not to be allowed to cross the river under any circumstances; that they must be held back at any cost. Behind them lay Moscow.

The first battle conducted by Malik was terrific. It lasted all day, almost without respite. The company of Germans, which had probably received equally imperative orders to advance, tried to cross the river at the section where Malik's platoon was stationed. The enemy was allowed to advance until the men were already in the water, when machine-gun fire was opened from above. The dark, cold, autumnal waters carried away the bodies along with the thin crust of ice which had already formed.

This was repeated several times. With each new attack Malik Gabdullin, whose knowledge of war had so far been limited to books and films, felt more sure of himself in

his role of commander. His orders became clearer and more decisive, his quiet voice more strict and demanding.

In the evening twilight, after having repulsed the last attacks and forced the remainder of the German company to leave the top of the opposite bank, he sent a liaison man to report to the commander that the assignment had been carried out and he was waiting for further orders. The nervous excitement of battle abated and Malik felt very tired as he sat peering cautiously into the darkness. With some surprise he became aware of a fact which he had not noticed during the confusion of battle. The gunfire, resounding heavily in the silence, for some reason came from behind his back. Inexperienced as he was, he did not understand what this meant.

Then Malik summoned Sergeant Kovalenko, a huge fellow who had been chairman of one of the leading kolkhozes in Kazakhstan. Malik had made his acquaintance in the troop train and had become attached to him for his optimism and clear thinking.

"Maxim Danilovich," he said, addressing him in civilian manner. "Go to the command post, my friend, and see if they're all asleep there. No communications, no orders. And

also find out what all that shooting behind us means.”

“All right, Comrade Gabdullin,” answered the sergeant, also in civilian fashion. “Only it seems to me that things are pretty bad. I don’t like that shooting.”

When Kovalenko returned two hours later, he was pale, caked with clay, and his great-coat was badly torn. Without a word he handed Malik a blood-spattered Party membership card, the covers of which had become stuck fast. Malik opened it with difficulty and discovered that it had belonged to the commander of the company. The Germans had crossed the river and forced back the platoons on the right flank. The commander of the company had been killed, taken unaware by enemy Tommy gunners. Kovalenko had seen the body of the liaison man on the road. In order to return to his positions, he himself had crawled through the fog, between the furrows of frozen ploughland for a whole kilometre in order to slip past the Germans.

“What shall we do, Commander?” he asked, warming blue, lacerated hands at the fire.

Malik had not yet lost the scientific habit of reducing everything to careful analysis. “What forces have I now at my disposal?”

he asked himself. There remained only forty-three men in the platoon. The one-day food rations were ending. The soldiers were smoking their last shreds of tobacco, cleaning out the seams of their pockets. The Germans were already in the rear. Who knew how far they had already advanced beyond the river? Retreat? But had not this platoon of greenhorns emerged victorious from yesterday's battle against a whole company? That experience had already turned Malik into a military man. The last order, received thirty-six hours ago, demanded that they hold out to the last man. And an order is an order.

"Build circular lines of defence, Comrade Sergeant," Malik said in a commanding tone.

Pickaxes pounded and shovels scraped against frozen clay.

The platoon fought the whole of the next day. The Germans brought three truckloads of infantry to the very riverbank. The observer, sitting in a pine, reported their approach in good time. Anti-tank riflemen, sturdy mechanics from Alma-Ata, crept down to the very water and managed to set these machines on fire before they even had time to stop. The machine gunners fired at the infantrymen who jumped out from under the flaming tarpaulins. All this went off smoothly. Chance

had spared the raw platoon thus far. But soon things became more difficult. Evidently deciding that they were dealing not with a handful of men but a large unit located not far from the riverbank, the Germans changed their tactics. They left the platoon alone, pinning it down with thin fire. While the remnants of the German company were firing at Malik's men, not permitting them to get out of the trenches and pressing them to the ground, the Germans crossed the river higher up the stream.

This was discovered unexpectedly. The clanking of caterpillar treads was heard from behind and Malik saw a tank. A tank of unfamiliar construction, with a white cross painted on it, was rolling heavily across the field, spitting shells as it went, breaking through the alder bushes and clearly trying to reach the rear of the platoon. Its steel carcass served as a shield for tommy gunners, some of whom were sitting on the tank, others running in its wake and firing.

"A tank to the right! Prepare hand grenades! Fire at the infantry!" Malik barely had time to command, trying to remember what the infantry field manual instructed one to do in such cases.

He grabbed a rifle from the hands of a

fallen Red Army man, and ran towards the tank along the communication trenches.

But before the words of the commander were transmitted along the line, the soldiers on the right flank began firing. The tank reached the first trench, stopped, and clumsily turned around over it, evidently trying to crush the men sitting in the narrow slits. This was a heavy tank. The anti-tank riflers fired at it, but their shells only struck sparks and bounced off the steel armour with a piercing whistle. The German tommy gunners tried to force their way deep among the ranks of the defenders.

For a moment it seemed to Malik that the situation was hopeless; that the steel monster was invincible and nothing could save the remnants of his platoon. He even unfastened his pistol holster. Well, he was ready to die with honour, fighting as befits a Soviet man! But the next moment he became convinced that there is no such thing as a hopeless situation in battle.

The figure of the Party organizer, Vasili Kondratyevich Shashko, rose for a moment above the foremost trench, the very trench on top of which the heavy tank was revolving with a clanking of treads and a puffing of smoke.

This was for only a brief second. But Malik saw him wave his hand as he shouted something. There was an explosion. A pillar of flame and earth caused the tank to shudder and stop. Then it jerked forward, damaged, but still formidable because of its gunfire. From the crushed trench once again rose the head of Shashko, now covered with blood. And once again he waved his hand. From somewhere behind the tank burst a black column of smoke. The explosion shook the earth, and suddenly the steel machine burst into flames, into fierce, ragged, smoky flames, as if the tank had been made of celluloid rather than of steel.

“For our comrade, for our Party organizer, for Vasilî Shasheko! Fire at infantry!” shouted Malik, pulling the trigger of his gun again and again.

He fired, changing cartridge clips and sweating blood until the German tommy gunners who had been trying to seize the foremost trenches were forced to flight. Then Malik, forgetting danger, jumped out of the trench. He did not see the explosions, did not hear the angry twang of bullets, was unconscious of everything about him. He only waved his rifle above his head and shouted with inspiration:

"At the retreating Germans in the name of Shashko! In the name of Vasili Kondratyevich! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

His enthusiasm infected the soldiers; they forgot their fear and fatigue and opened up such devastating fire that one might have thought they represented a whole company of fresh reserves, rather than the worn remnants of a battered platoon.

Malik's men held out for still another day, encircled as they were. The Germans, taking advantage of their success, advanced further and further from the river, leaving small covering detachments to fight the resisting handful of men. The soldiers ate their last rusks, smoked tree moss and shot their last cartridges. Only twenty-two men were left in the platoon, and the line of the front had moved so far to the east that the artillery bombardment was barely audible, sounding like the rumble of a distant train. Obviously there was no longer any point in holding the position. Malik decided to try to break through the encirclement of the covering detachments and join his own division.

At night they buried the dead, removing guns and Party cards from the bodies. When, just before dawn, a frosty mist enveloped the unharvested, desecrated fields, the soldiers

crawled one by one out of the enemy ring as if melting in the mist.

They entered the forest, lined up, and had a roll call. Malik announced that he was going to try to reach their division. At the command "Forward march!" the men headed for the sound of the distant cannonade.

For three days Malik, getting his bearings from the compass and the thunder of the distant guns, led his platoon through roadless forests and swamps. Hungry men, who had not had a crumb in their mouths for four days, moved forward in military formation, sending scouts ahead, placing patrols on the flanks. They carried their machine guns, or rolled them along the ground. They took turns carrying the wounded on ground sheets fastened to poles. Like a magnet attracts iron filings, so this small unit, welded by the strict discipline enforced by its commander, attracted soldiers and commanders of retreating units who had made individual escapes from enemy encirclement.

By the third day of march, Malik's detachment already numbered one hundred and eighty-seven soldiers, with twelve machine guns and twenty tommy guns, with plenty of cartridges, but not a crumb of bread nor a pinch of tobacco.

Now hunger was the chief enemy. It became harder and harder to march. The soldiers staggered, barely dragging their feet along, so that the column stretched out into a long, straggling line through the forest. During halts the soldiers threw themselves on the frozen ground, and it was very hard to get them on their feet again. Louder and louder were the voices asserting that they would not get anywhere in such numbers; that it would be better to break up and let each shift for himself, taking the risk; that the wounded must be left in some village and the machine guns be abandoned, first damaging them. Some of the weaker ones began dropping their weapons.

Malik ordered a long halt. He called all the Communists and Komsomol members into a ravine. He announced his decision to preserve the unit at any cost and to continuously march forward. The strong ones must in turn help the weak, carrying their weapons and the wounded. The Communists and Komsomols must set the example. He threatened to shoot panicmongers and disorganizers on the spot. The civilian in him was still strong. He put his decision to a vote. All were in favour of it. Then Malik ordered the Communists and Komsomols to heat some water

in the morning, wash off the dirt of the march, the soot of the campfires, to shave and put their clothes and weapons in order.

At daybreak the whole unit lined up in a forest clearing against a wall of spruce trees.

"Attention!" ordered Malik.

The soldiers drew up to silent attention. But what soldiers they were! They barely stood on their feet in their singed and grimy greatcoats and forage caps, with unshaven, sooty faces in which sunken eyes burned feverishly in dark eyesockets. Some were unable to keep their knees from bending, and leaned trembling against their neighbours for support. But among these tired, exhausted men, the Communists and Komsomol members were distinguished today by their energy, their neat appearance, their washed and shaven faces. And among them was the giant Kovačenko, who had even managed to find polish somewhere and shined his boots. Malik's eyes rested for a moment on his large feet in shining boots, firmly planted in the snow, and suddenly he felt better.

"I've been told that some of you think the unit should be dissolved and each shift for himself. Perhaps it would be better to separate?" said Malik, glancing at the tired faces

of the soldiers with his narrow, black, beautiful eyes.

The soldiers looked at him in wary amazement and perplexity. But on some faces he caught an expression of approbation. These nodded their heads in agreement and one of the soldiers who had most recently joined, a bearded fellow in a peasant cap instead of a forage cap, whispered happily to his neighbours.

"Well, speak up," ordered Malik.

"I say it would be better to separate. Such a gang will never get across the front unnoticed.... Singly I say, it'll be easier, more sure."

A hubbub arose in the lines. Malik realized that this little soldier who had completely lost all military aspect during the long days of tramping in the woods, had voiced the opinion of a number of those who had recently joined the unit. He stood all huddled up, quietly stamping the ground with his torn boots which were caked with reddish clay. Kovalenko's shining boots, his big feet standing resolutely in the snow, again drew Malik's attention. He noticed a broom lying close by. The soldiers had probably used it to sweep the snow from around the bonfire.

And thinking of how to answer this little

soldier shivering with cold and worn out with wandering, this recent collector of folklore recalled the ancient tale known to all peoples. He picked up the broom, pulled out a twig from it, and handing it to the small soldier, ordered him to break it. The soldier looked at the commander in surprise as if to say, "Perhaps the man has gone mad from hunger." But he obeyed, and easily broke the twig. Malik gave him the broom:

"Break it!"

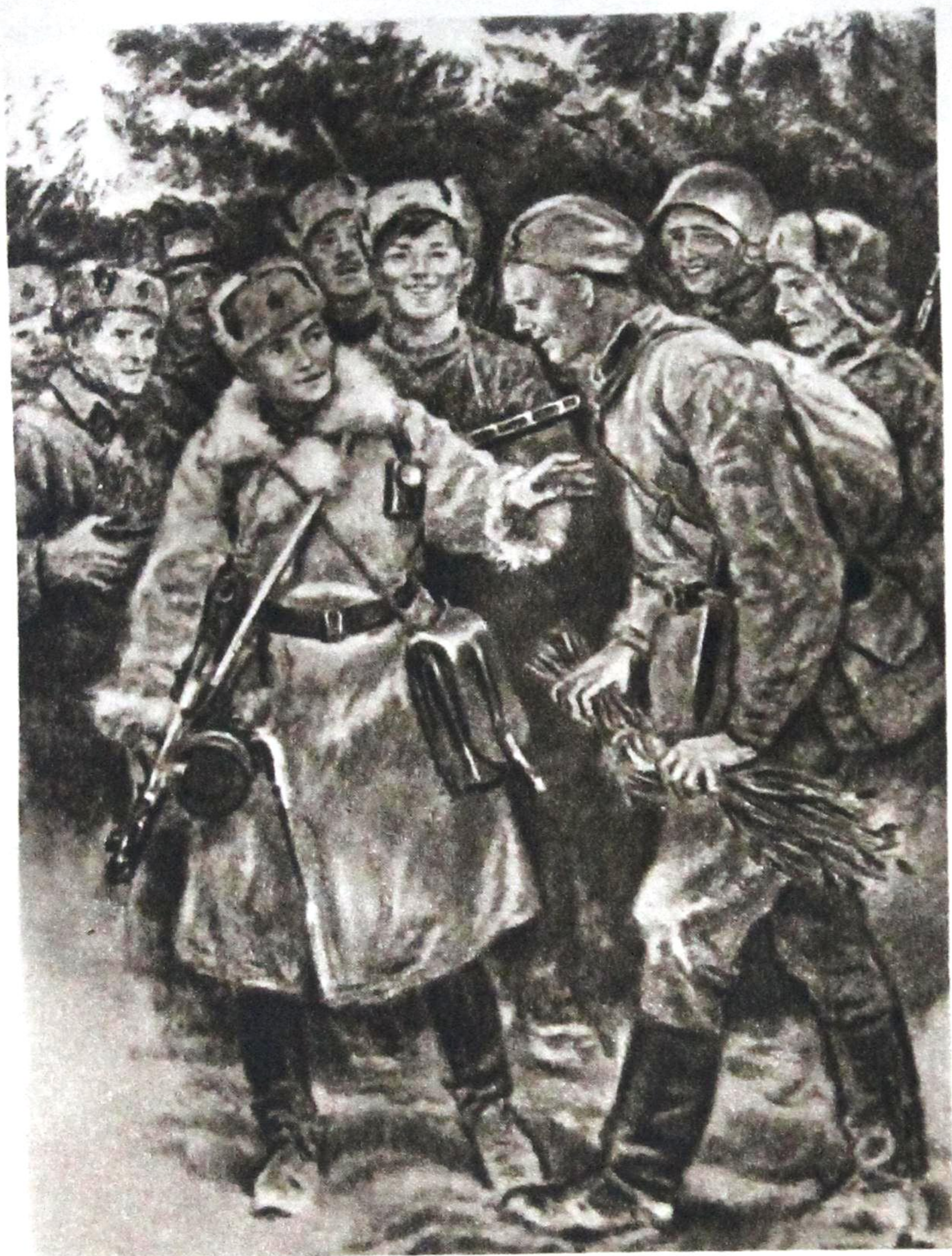
The broom bent but did not break.

"Well, try again!" ordered Malik. The hoarse laughter of tired people was heard from all sides. "Bend it some more, don't spare your strength!"

"Use more pressure! Come on! What, won't it break?" shouted the soldiers from all sides as they glanced at the commander, guessing what he was driving at.

"That's what we're like: as long as we are together and disciplined, no enemy can break us," explained Malik, adding sternly: "With my own hand I'll shoot the first one who tries to leave the detachment. Do you understand? At-ten-tion!"

In the evening the scouts who had been sent ahead returned and reported that along the way on the right there was a village which



had not been burned down by the Germans but was occupied by them. Sergeant Kovalenko, who had also been sent out, did not return until after dark. He reported that judging by all signs—large warehouses, lots of wires strung up, etc.—some commissary station must be located; that although no defence works had been dug, the village was heavily guarded and patrols were stationed in all directions, but that they were rather careless and stood around campfires warming themselves most of the time, so that it would be possible to get by. At the end of the report, the sergeant pulled out a bottle of milk and a piece of bread and offered it to the commander:

“Here, eat this. I brought it for you. The women along the way gave it to me. Oh, how anxious they are to see us!”

“Give it to the wounded,” said Malik, bending over the map and making believe that food did not interest him in the least, although the smell of the sour bread made his mouth water and his head swim.

He decided to risk attacking the village and seizing food supplies from the Germans.

Surprise and cunning must substitute for lack of forces in the plan which he worked out during the night. Before the dawn, when

night still reigned in the forest and the trees were barely distinguishable in the cold darkness, at the hour when man sleeps the heaviest, the detachment quietly surrounded the village and opened fire from all their machine guns. The echo of the shots had barely died away when the soldiers with shouts of "hurrah" rushed forward from four directions, crushed the defence detachments, and in brief hand-to-hand street fighting decided the outcome of the battle. The Germans fled, leaving more than fifty killed and all their food and munition stores. Twenty-seven Germans surrendered.

Malik ordered the soldiers to fill their knapsacks with food and tobacco, to place their wounded, machine guns, and a supply of food on German sleighs found in one of the dumps, and harness the prisoners to the sleighs. Whatever German property remained was to be saturated with benzine and set on fire.

For a long time as they made their way through the wood, the detachment could see the columns of smoke behind them rising to meet the clouds. Toward evening of the seventh day of march, the fed and heartened soldiers attacked the rear of the German foreposts, penetrating the front like a dagger,

almost without losses. Thus they broke through to their own division. On their sleighs the detachment brought twelve machine guns and twenty tommy guns. Many of the soldiers were armed with trophy tommy guns in addition to their own. Sixteen wounded were brought in and twenty-seven prisoners were handed over to the commandant.

Kovalenko, the giant, also brought to the regiment a four-year-old boy named Vova, whom he and Malik had found among the ruins of a charred village, burned by the Germans. They had decided to take the orphan with them. They carried him on their backs in turn, and during dangerous moments left him in the bushes in care of the wounded. Thus the child made the whole march on the shoulders of the soldiers. Later he was sent to Moscow in an ambulance which happened to be making the trip, and there he was placed in a children's home.

General Panfilov* himself asked to see Malik. During the formation of the division in Alma-Ata, he had run his experienced eye sceptically over this neat, timid scientist who had come to him with a recommendation from

* Major General Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov (1893-1941) lost his life in the Battle of Moscow.—*Tr.*

the district committee. Now the general was anxious to see what changes the war had wrought in him. From under his stern eyebrows the stern warrior studied the slim figure of Malik, who still looked out of place in a uniform. Then the face of this stern warrior livened up and softened.

“There’s a collector of folk tales for you! There’s a scientist for you! Good for you! You’ll make a fine soldier!” he said in a voice which seemed to issue from a barrel as he hugged him and kissed him three times in the Russian manner.

Those who were present related that at that moment an expression of paternal joy lighted the face of this general, whose fame has since become widespread.

From this “hunger march” as it was jokingly called in the division, the young scientist gained a firm belief in himself, in his men, and in the old soldiers’ saying that there are no hopeless situations for a skilled, courageous fighter, and that even in retreating, one can be the victor. This conclusion was put to the test in his next great experience when, during the period of the offensive, the commander of the regiment sent Malik with thirteen Tommy gunners into ambush to guard the deepest wedge cut into enemy positions.

At this point a counterattack was expected, and because the regiment, having lost a number of men in recent battles, was "pulling itself together" so to say, this ambush was to protect it from any fortuities.

Malik moved his small detachment during the night. He chose for the ambush a suitable position in the bushes on the bank of a frozen stream which reminded him of his position on the Rusa where he had fought his first battle. Having sent private Abdulla Kerimov to patrol, he ordered the other soldiers to dig deep slit trenches during the night and set up gun emplacements. The soldiers grumbled at the commander for putting them to work without a moment's rest—as though they could not wait until morning! But at dawn, when they were camouflaging the ready trenches by covering the parapets with snow, Kerimov ran in breathless and announced that five tanks and a company of infantry were moving under cover along the hollow towards Malik's ambush.

Five tanks and hundreds of men against thirteen tommy gunners! Such a balance of forces would have upset even an experienced commander. But Malik, who had analytically observed the great Battle of Moscow, already knew that success in battle was not decided

by arithmetic equations. In a calm and even commonplace tone he ordered preparations for battle to be made; the infantry must be separated from the tanks by tommy-gun fire and not a shot was to be fired without his orders. The foremost fighters must get anti-tank grenades ready. Malik himself tied incendiary bottles to three grenades, for in those days this was considered by veteran soldiers the surest anti-tank means, and crawled to the foremost trench.

The tanks stopped on the edge of the wood to let the infantry pass. Not expecting an ambush, and probably thinking they were passing through no man's land, the soldiers advanced in large groups, stooping over carelessly, simply to obey the letter of the law. Malik leaned his chin on the cold parapet and held his breath. The Germans looked about them as they walked, but not in the direction of Malik's men—which meant they had not seen them and had not an inkling of their presence—which meant they must be allowed to come as close as possible. The louder the volleys, the greater the panic, and the less the danger, damn it all!

Malik had convinced himself that this was the correct method, but despite his conclusions, he was anxious to give the order to shoot im-

mediately. "Self-control. Once again self-control!" he kept telling himself. The crunching of the snow could already be heard under the Germans' boots. "Self-control, keep calm!"

"Let us fire, please let us fire!" the impatient Kerimov whispered feverishly to his commander who was lying beside him.

Just a little longer. Just a tiny bit. Let them all come out of the forest into the clearing. To strike at them all simultaneously! The first ones were only a few steps away! Now was the time!

"Fire!"

One of the Germans screamed wildly. They all came to a halt. Brief volleys spluttered. Several soldiers fell. The remainder lay down and fired at the bushes. But this was all right, they were lying in a snowy clearing. They could be seen far off, like crows on the road.

"Fire!"

The tommy gunners shot all the more energetically. The targets were clear. "They won't hold out, they won't hold out!" Malik said to himself, passionately hoping for the moment when they would flee. The number did not frighten him. A soldier in a trench was worth ten on open ground. And they did

not hold out. They were crawling back on all fours. "More, more!"

The tommy gunners strained every effort. The volleys blended into one grand roar. White fountains of snow spurted up in the clearing, as when heavy rain falls over a lake. "A-ha! Run, you rascals, you!"

"Hur-ra-ah!"

A German officer in a greatcoat with a fur collar was standing near a pine waving his revolver. Apparently he was trying to stop the retreat. Malik pressed his cheek against the cold butt of his gun and held his breath. The black point of the sight sought out the officer. Bang! Missed. Never mind, they kept running past the officer, yelling something and pointing to the bushes. What was that? Machine-gun fire coming from the forest. Whose? Could it be ours? A-ha, it was the German barrier detachments. That's what it was. Malik had already heard that the Germans had units which shot at their own men when they ran away. "All right, all right, keep your head!"

Caught between two fires, the Germans turned and again advanced. There was nothing else they could do. They moved jerkily, in short dashes.

"If only my men don't waver! If only they don't come out of the trenches!" thought

Malik. "If only they don't let the Germans guess how many of us there are here!" The bullets twittered like birds, as they hit the branches, shaking down the snow. For some reason he noticed that the sharp-beaked, yellow-breasted blue titmice were chirruping fearlessly as they flew about in the bushes.

The jovial Gaisin, who always had a supply of spicy stories for his friends, was killed. The good-natured, coolheaded Kutsevoi whom Malik had first met on the troop train, was no more. The liaison man Kerimov fell on his side like a wounded mountain goat, but immediately raised his head, and, leaning his chest on the parapet, took up his tommy gun. Only nine remained to hold out. Tommy guns chattered in the bushes, stubbornly and businesslike, and it was hard to guess how many there were—ten, fifteen, a hundred....

Malik crawled from one to another, supple, quick and flushed, his shining black eyes burning with excitement.

"Hold out for just a little while longer! They'll run away soon!"

Each of the men felt that the commander was ever at his side, and heard how evenly his gun kept firing.

"Soon, soon they'll flee!"

And indeed the Germans did flee. And this time their barrier detachments were silent. Most probably the enemy staff considered further attacks futile. But a green rocket tore into the pale air. What could this mean? Single explosions were heard very close by. Trench mortars! Mines with a premonitory mewling began to fall into the bushes. But the soldiers had not worked for nothing all night, digging the frozen ground. Now they were lying in narrow slits. Whizzing splinters flew over their heads into the bushes, covering them with twigs, cones, and frozen earth. But they remained safe! Safe, damn it!

The trench mortars fell silent. But there was no general silence; the purring of motors could be heard. Tanks! Most probably the same which Kerimov had reported. Of course. There they were coming out of the forest. Could it be that they were being sent to help? With a roar the machines crossed the edge of the clearing.

Five tanks and a company of infantry against nine soldiers and their commander! Retreat? Run? But you can't run away from a tank. To run means to die. Fight! To repulse the tanks. This was the only chance to live, to conquer. All this flashed through Malik's

brain as he crawled over the snow to meet the tanks, dragging a bag containing grenades with incendiary bottles tied to them.

The machines moved in the favourite German formation—the wedge formation—and the leading tank was heading directly for the stump behind which Malik lay. The tanks fired rapid volleys from their guns on the move. The shells flew high above their heads. “What is this for? There is nothing there. Just for the sake of the noise?” thought Malik as he jerked a grenade from his bag. And then another thought came to him: “They themselves are afraid!”

The front tank headed straight for him. He could already see every scratch on its armour. He clearly saw in his mind’s eye the Party organizer Shashko, great and beautiful in his inspiration of selfless battle. At that moment the machine rumbled by so close that the polished track almost crushed his hand. Malik jumped back. Straightening like a spring, he jumped up. The grenade with the incendiary bottle landed right on the radiator of the machine.

The explosion knocked Malik to one side. This saved him from the second machine which had headed directly for him. He did not lose consciousness, but there was no time

to throw the grenade. Malik almost shoved it under the treads and, springing back, clung to the earth. The explosion was so great that the tank almost turned on its side. Falling back heavily, it stopped and a sticky yellow flame enveloped it like a cloak. The bottle had done its work.

The deafened Malik, feeling as if his whole body were being pricked with electric current, again reached for his bag. But what was this? Three machines slowed down and began turning around hastily, jerkily. Against whom? Against their own? Of course not, they were going back. They were retreating! When this penetrated his mind, Malik fell unconscious to the ground. The touch of snow brought him to. Two soldiers crawling low along the ground dragged him to the bushes.

"And we thought you'd been flattened out like a pancake!" said the one across whose shoulders Malik lay.

"Come on, come on, hurry, they're turning their snouts towards us again," hastened the other, helping him.

Malik sat in the foxhole in the bushes. His whole body ached and trembled; the sharp pricking became torturous. His damp underwear stuck to his shoulder blades, hampering his movements. Malik examined himself,

pinched himself. No, he was not wounded; He was whole. He greedily swallowed some snow. Steam rose from him like from a driven horse.

But despite the pain from concussion, everything in him sang and triumphed. He, a lone man, had conquered five tanks, those mighty monsters! And again before his eyes, sharply, clearly, as if alive, flashed the figure of the Party organizer Shashko.

"Comrade Commander, get down in the foxhole, they're firing again," someone warned him.

Having retreated to a safe distance, the tanks opened fire. And the trench mortar battery again began firing from the forest. The tommy gunners had only five or ten cartridges left in their disks. It was clear that they must retreat. But the tanks on the edge of the forest barred the way to their own regiment. Malik looked at the map. He mentally drew a line to a spot just opposite his own positions, straight into the forest, to the German trench mortars. He calculated that it would be more correct to return to his own regiment in a roundabout way through the woods. He knew that the soldiers had firm faith in him, and would fulfil any command he gave.

They crawled on all fours along the bed of the frozen stream to the edge of the forest, to that very place where the enemy mortar crews were sweating in their neat, comfortable lairs, sending mine after mine into the opposite bushes, where no one now remained. At Malik's silent sign, under the cover of the shots, the soldiers rushed at the trench mortar crews, killed them with their last cartridges, took their guns, even their documents, and, having damaged the trench mortars, disappeared into the forest.

They made a wide detour through the thickets and reached their own regiment much later. When Malik unexpectedly opened the door to the dugout where Lieutenant Colonel Karpov, commander of the regiment, was sitting at the table with his commissar, Mukhomedyarov, the two men looked around and jumped to their feet. A strange expression of amazement crossed their faces as they gazed at Malik standing in the passage in his torn, bloodstained, camouflage coverall.

"Gabdullin?" finally said the commander quietly.

"Malik!" exclaimed the commissar, his old comrade from Alma-Ata, as he rushed over to him.

"It's me.... What are you so surprised

about, what's the matter with you? Tell me what has happened," said Malik in his turn.

The commander picked up the paper they had just been reading and handed it to Malik: "In battle near the village Shiryaevo, thirteen commy gunners of our regiment, headed by Gabdullin Malik, died the death of heroes. The scout reported that they fought to the last breath. In unequal battle they destroyed two German tanks and one hundred and fifty Hitlerites." The paper was signed by Anikin, Commander of the Fifth Company, and Jejibayev, secretary of the Komsomol bureau of the regiment.

"Well, what does this mean?" asked the commander.

"We were just mourning your loss," added the commissar.

"It's all true, except that we didn't die," replied Malik with a weary smile. He had such an overwhelming desire to sleep that he could barely keep his eyes open.

"What we need is more of such corpses," joked the regiment commissar rather clumsily.

He rummaged in a suitcase under his cot and brought out a bottle of brandy, carefully wrapped in clean underclothes, and placed it on the table.

"When I left Alma-Ata, my wife gave it to

me for the trip," he explained. "I promised myself I would not open this bottle until Victory Day. And I've been carrying it around ever since. But I think we should have a drink on an occasion like this! To your health, Malik!"

The words of General Panfilov, the shrewd old soldier and expert in the art of war, had come true. This scientist and collector of folklore had developed into a skilful commander. And although outwardly he remained the same thin, youthful city boy with a fine olive face, seemingly carved out of ivory, with the long, narrow hands of an intellectual, he had become a hardy unpretentious soldier, strict with himself and demanding of those under his command.

He was already at the head of a company of scouts. When this company was sent to rest up after battle, he did not allow his men any peace even then. Daily, from morning until night, he taught his Kazakh soldiers to ski, and together with them perfected this art so unusual, and therefore so difficult for his people. He was a bad shot at the beginning of the war, so during rare moments of rest, when his comrades were having a bath or a nap, he would go off into the woods and practise shooting, until he was finally able to hit a pine cone

at the first shot. He had already been decorated with the Order of the Red Star and the Order of the Red Banner. His scouts were well-known throughout the army. Their fame grew as the offensive grew. The story of Malik was spread by wounded soldiers home on leave and by letters written from the Panfilov division, so that he was known from the cold Kalinin woods to far-off Kazakhstan. He was spoken of at kolkhozes. Old men compared him to legendary heroes. Poems were written about him. Without suspecting it, he became a hero of steppe folk songs, the very songs which he had once collected with so much love and devotion.

In the winter of 1942 his division advanced in the vanguard of the army. Karpov's regiment marched at the head of the division and Malik's skier scouts were its escorts. The division broke through the enemy's flank, surrounded it, and penetrated behind enemy lines. It was to close the ring of encirclement around one of the large German units, stubbornly resisting in the forest. The pincers almost met. Only a narrow bottleneck remained. In the centre of it, like a lock, was a strongly fortified village where the German staff was located. This village had to be taken in order to close the bottleneck.

It was decided to throw the first battalion and Gabdullin's scout company into this operation. After a wide detour through forests and swamps, they were to unexpectedly attack the village, seize it and hold it until the division's arrival. Malik's men, steeled by long and weary training, easily made the difficult forest march. After giving his men a rest, Malik summoned them and ordered them to drop their knapsacks and everything else they could manage without.

"We'll have breakfast there—booty snacks," he said.

By twelve o'clock the whole company was concentrated at the edge of the forest, close to the village. Malik looked at his watch. The attack was timed for 12:15. But the battalion he was coordinating with had not yet arrived.

The best skier had long since been sent to make contact. The minutes dragged. Finally the skier returned and reported that the battalion was making a cross-country march without skis, moving very slowly because of the difficulty of getting through the deep snow. It appeared they would not get here for another three hours at least. Everything was calculated on surprise. The village would be difficult to take, surrounded as it was by blockhouses and

dug-in tanks. If the Germans happened to find out what was awaiting them and brought the whole might of their firing system into action, it would be hard to crush them even with the forces of a division.

Experience had taught Malik to value every minute under such circumstances. And he decided to attack the village with his own men. He divided them into four unequal groups. Into one group he collected all the physically weak and inexperienced. All the disks loaded with tracer bullets were given to them. They were to go to the village through the woods from the direction whence the Germans might expect an attack, settle themselves comfortably, and at 13:00 sharp open rapid fire, shifting their positions continually. Meanwhile, two groups of skiers commanded by Senior Sergeant Timonin and Sergeant Monakhov, were to approach the village from two sides without a shot if possible, break into the German trenches, and seize the blockhouses from the rear. Malik himself with the main attacking group decided to rush into the village and wipe out the Germans in houses and streets.

This plan of attacking a large German garrison protected by powerful fortifications, with only one company of soldiers seems in-

credible, viewed from the postwar period. But this plan, worked out by a commander strongly believing in himself and in his men, was carried out to the slightest detail on that day. And about two hours later, when the straggling battalion finally reached the scene of battle, Malik's men were already finishing the fight, driving Germans out of the last blockhouses and catching them in cellars and attics.

Malik himself was sitting in the damaged headquarters of the German staff, reading the documents that had been seized. One of his soldiers named Martynov, formerly a mechanic at a Leningrad machine plant, was sweating over the locks of two safes, swearing at the Germans for their tricky gadgets. He succeeded, however, in opening the safes. In one was the location map of the district, important staff documents, and a great deal of counterfeit money. The other was full of boxes containing iron crosses ready to be sent to units, the encirclement of which Malik Gabdulin's scouts had just completed.

Thus, from deed to deed, from battle to battle, the young folklore scholar grew into a hero similar to those in the songs and legends of his people. And when his fame had spread over the whole front, he, a fighting commander, a skilful political educator, an excellent linguist

who spoke Russian, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek, Kara-Kalpak, Tatar and German freely, was appointed political instructor amongst soldiers of non-Russian nationalities. And he began travelling from unit to unit, bringing the teachings of the Bolshevik Party to the soldiers.

It was about one such visit that the soldier-folksinger sang in the snow-covered ravine near the front line.

On the Bank of the Volga

IN A BATTLE like that of Stalingrad, even the most seasoned soldiers feel uneasy in moments of sudden silence when the earth ceases trembling from explosions and the whistle of lone bullets can be heard.

It was on one such rare occasion he crawled to me over the old, dry straw, placed his hand on my greatcoat and asked:

“Are you asleep? Give me a light. Let’s have a smoke.”

There were three of us—an elderly sapper from the motor barge, a nurse who was a sanitary instructor from the medical corps and had been wounded in the shoulder, and I. We were sheltered in a small hole dug in the steep clay bank above the crossing, waiting until the damaged motor barge should be repaired on the other side of the Volga.

The sapper was nervous, and every few minutes would run outside. He was annoyed that he was here and could not help with the repairs. In order to make the minutes pass more quickly he took his rifle apart and cleaned it for the third time, carefully placing the already shining parts on his foot cloth.

“Shall we smoke? You don’t smoke? Good for you. It’s better for the health and easier on the pocket. I only started smoking when I was forty-seven. Couldn’t hold out any longer. I started here in Stalingrad. . . . Anyone’ll smoke here! I’ve probably seen more during these two months on the crossing than you two have seen in your whole lives, even if you are soldiers. Really.”

He puffed away at a huge, clumsily rolled cigarette, and watched the direction of the smoke in the semidarkness of the dugout, seeming to be thinking aloud rather than telling a story.

“I’m a peaceful person. And my work was peaceful: prospecting. . . . I’m from the Urals myself. Well, out there I used to pan gold for the artel. It’s a good paying job if you know your work. I didn’t even enjoy hunting, honest to God. Believe it or not, I couldn’t bear the sight of blood. Sometimes when we were

pressed for food and I had to hunt in the taiga (everybody's a hunter out there), I would always try to kill the bird or beast outright so as not to see it quiver.

"When I was mobilized I was very glad that I was appointed to a pontoon unit, because pontoon crews don't have to shoot much. I couldn't even imagine shooting a man. Well, that was what I used to be like. Now I hardly know myself!

"We came to this very bank in August to put up reserve crossings. Of course I was tickled to death. Who hasn't heard of Stalingrad! Although we prospectors live, so to speak, in the very thick of the taiga and are often accused of being grizzly bears ourselves, nevertheless, you can ask any one of us, and he'll answer: Stalingrad's a city on the Volga which Comrade Stalin himself defended in 1918, smashing the Whiteguards to smithereens.

"And all of us also knew about the famous tractor plant, the pride of the First Five-Year Plan, for although we live out there among forests and rocks, and our wheat fields are nothing to brag about, it's the Stalingrad tractors that plough them....

"Well, we put up the crossing and there was nothing else to do, so the commander

permitted us to take a trip around the city. We washed, cleaned our boots, sewed on clean collars, all as it should be, and went sight-seeing. A beautiful city; it gladdened the heart—clean and spacious. And what houses, stores and streets! Everything a workingman could wish for! After work you could take a walk on the boulevard, sit down at a table in the park and have a mug of beer, or go to the theatre. The theatre there was so big your hat would fall off if you looked up at it. We found the house where Stalin had had his headquarters during the Civil War—turned into a museum it was, with a marble slab on the entrance. And although the museum was closed, we stood in front and had a good look at it. And although we were sappers and not expected to do much shooting, as I already explained, still it was flattering to be sent to defend such a city—a city named after Stalin, and as you see, a city Stalin himself had defended.

“It was a clear Sunday. The kids were playing in the sand on the boulevards. Girls and women in bright dresses were strolling along the streets. And on this quiet, beautiful Sunday, a hundred or more German bombers suddenly appeared. And there they were flattening out the city, flying right over the

streets and houses, block after block. One group would drop their load, then others would fly over and unload, and already a third group could be heard coming in. And this city which had so gladdened the heart of the workingman—calm, peaceful, joyful, suddenly burst into flame.

“Our planes flew at the Germans and knocked some of them down. But they had five times as many planes as we did. They had the upper hand, and they kept on bombing for all they were worth.

“One drought year when I was still a boy I saw the taiga burn. It’s an awful thing when the taiga burns. Believe it or not, even the animals go mad from such a fire. I used to think I would never see anything more terrible than those forest fires. But I did. The city was turned into a mountain of flame. And along the burning streets, through the scorching heat, women and little children ran towards the Volga; old folks went hobbling along somehow; other people, all members of the peaceful population, so to say, tried to get away as best they could, their hair scorched, their clothing smoking.... Hell it was, I’m telling you—just hell!

“We, pontoon men, worked hard that night. Forgot about ourselves—no time to

think! We carried refugees across the Volga all night long while the fascists bombed and strafed. But it was impossible to get such a mass of people across immediately. Just look how wide the Volga is here! And it was just the crossing that the fascists kept bombing! 'Messers' picked out the places where the people gathered and swooped down out of the clouds like buzzards, firing machine guns at the peaceful population, so to say.

"I've already seen a lot in the war, and I'll perhaps see a lot more, but I doubt that I'll ever see anything as bad as that. My heart grew heavy with anger: What are you doing, you villains? Do you call this war? Do you think you can get away with shooting at old folks and women and little children like that? What law permits that?

"An old bald-headed man all covered with blood jumped into my barge. He had two little boys in his arms. One was dead, the other was still breathing, but his little leg had been torn off. The old man, their grandfather, had gone completely mad, and kept yelling at the planes: 'You devils! Who gave you the right to shoot babies?'

"Then he fell on the deck and cried: 'My grandsons, my grandsons!' And then again to

the fascists: 'You devils! May you be cursed from this day on to the end of time!'

"A wounded woman was brought on board. She was placed in the stern, near the motor, at my very feet so that she wouldn't be trampled in the crowd. Dying, she pressed her little child to her breast. She was drawing her last breath, but still she tried to cover the child with her body because they were shooting from above...."

The sapper's voice trembled and broke. He made believe he was listening to the renewal of the cannonade as he turned away and secretly wiped a tear with his sleeve.

The wounded girl sitting in the corner seemed to have turned to stone from the tension. And it seemed that her large eyes were flashing in the semidarkness, so fierce was the anger in them.

"And I remember," continued the sapper in a somewhat changed voice, "how they set a hospital ship on fire from the air. It was the *Composer Borodin*, an enormous four-decked ship, but it burst into flame like birch bark. And all the passengers were badly wounded, bedridden. As the ship burned they crawled along the decks, stuck their heads out of the port holes, called for help, groaned and cursed

the Hitlerites. Fishermen rushed their boats to the ship from all sides and started dragging the wounded out. Your girls—" he nodded towards the nurse, "what fine girls they are! The ship was one mass of flames. Their hair and skirts caught on fire, but they paid no attention to it. Unmindful of themselves, they continued carrying out the wounded and lowering them into boats. Thank heaven our planes came and chased away the 'Messers.' One which was brought down then is still sticking out of the water opposite the monument to the Stalingrad flier Kholzunov, Hero of the Soviet Union.... Yes, we saw plenty in those days.

"In the evening the Germans bombed a huge raft that was going down the river loaded with children from the orphan homes. It was a clumsy wooden thing and began to sink rapidly. A ghastly sight. Sailors and fishermen and we sappers rushed in boats to save them. The 'Messers' flew in circles over the raft and fired from cannon and machine guns at the boats: they couldn't bear the idea that the children might be saved!... What a horror! There the children were drowning, holding out their arms to us!... No, it's best not to recall it!... I also remember how one young woman jumped from the raft into the water

with a child in her arms when the raft was already half submerged. She could swim well. Floating on her back, she kicked with her feet, holding the child above the water.

"I rowed towards her with all my might and shouted:

" 'Hold on, hold on, I'll reach you soon!' I was already stretching out my hand to take the baby when a 'Messer' flew right over and fired at her! Pft-pft-pft! She and the child sank like a stone, leaving nothing but blood-stained water to mark the spot."

The sapper suddenly broke off his narrative and screamed passionately:

"Do you call them people? Would a human being do such a thing? Is a fascist a human being? Comrade Stalin spoke of 'the fascist beast!' A beast he is, and what a beast! You won't find his equal even in the taiga! . . . Well, Comrade Major, believe it or not, before the war I felt bad about killing a squirrel, but after all this, my heart has become covered with a crust. It has hardened. I'm a sapper, and my work isn't easy here. As you see, I keep the crossing operating in spite of mines and bullets. You know yourself that they make us their target. But by God, I envy the soldiers who are there in the city shooting at

the Germans. I keep thinking: 'They're right here alongside of you, man—the fascists—on this very Volga,' and it gives me no peace of mind day or night. I've become hard, I have. I'm even surprised at myself.

"Once a whole flock of prisoners were led by. They were taken across to the other bank on our barge—an unshaven, dirty, ragged bunch. Some of them were wounded, others could hardly stand on their feet, pressing up close together in their fright like a flock of sheep. And as I looked at them I went white with anger: perhaps one of them had shot that woman with the child. I couldn't look at this scum calmly. I felt myself trembling. I turned around and for safety's sake gave my rifle to my pal, private Senya Kulikov: 'Take it; I'm afraid I won't be able to control myself,' I said.

"I took this scum across and went straight to my commander, a captain of the engineers. I reported this and that according to form and then I asked to be recommended to a rifle unit. 'What's the idea? Why?' asked the commander. 'Because I won't have any peace until I get even with them,' I answered. 'I can't let you go, you're needed here,' he says. But I kept hammering away at my own tune like a woodpecker. 'Let me go to the

fighting lines, I can't stand it any longer.' He listened for awhile and then said: 'All right, if you're so eager to fight on the front lines, I'll let you go into the city when your shift is over. The front is there, a half hour's walk; have a shot and then get back to your post.'

"Well that's what I do now: I stand watch at the crossing during the night and join the sailors on the hill during the day. They are stationed about three kilometres from here. I fight together with them using this Russian three-linear rifle. Good gun! Well, I told you I couldn't bear the sight of blood, couldn't bear killing a bird; but since I've been sitting in the trenches with the sailors I've killed many a fascist without my hand shaking in the least.

"I've bumped off quite a few. But still I have no peace of mind, Comrade Major. I keep seeing that woman with the child in the water, and my hands itch. I just can't help it. . . . I won't calm down until there's not a single fascist roving at large in our native land, or until a bullet gets me. That's how things stand."

The sapper fell silent. He was a typical Russian soldier, no longer young, thickset,

with a moustache and deep wrinkles on his face and neck. And at this moment his face was very stern, solemn and tense, like that of a man who has just taken an oath.

I asked his name.

“Isidor Nikolayevich Fominykh, private in a pontoon battalion; I’m from the Urals myself, from out there....”



Tarakul's Redoubt

WE WALKED for a long time through the northern outskirts of Stalingrad, uttering the secret password to the patrols who kept silently appearing before us. We made our way through pitted back yards and trampled gardens; we climbed over brick barricades and crawled through sooty ruins of houses in which passages had been made through the walls for safety of movement; we lifted up the hems of our greatcoats and rushed headlong across streets and open squares.

Finally Lieutenant Shokhenko stopped under cover of a wall, shifted his rifle to the other shoulder, and said with a catch of breath:

"Well, here we are. Here. This is what the lads in our division call Tarakul's redoubt."

He pointed to a formless mound of broken brick and beams where once upon a time, judging from its contours, a massive little house of the style merchants used to build for themselves had stood.

This took place at a late hour of a restless frontline night, just before dawn, when even Stalingrad was silent, and cold moonbeams silvered the grey clouds of low-lying mist, out of which rose the skeletons of once large and beautiful buildings. Everything around—the shell-shot telegraph posts with their useless wires waving about like curls; the miraculously-preserved mineral water stand on the corner, shot through and through by bullets; the mounds of debris—everything was covered with hoarfrost that glittered like mica.

The street had been churned and ploughed by shells and mines. Here and there piles of empty cartridges clinked underfoot. The rimy edges of bomb craters reminded one of the spots on the moon. On the branches of a broken poplar hung the blackened rags of someone's greatcoat. All this indicated that the place had been the scene of a very recent, very long and fierce battle, the centre of which had been this completely devastated house.

“Tarakul's redoubt,” repeated Lieutenant Shokhenko, who evidently liked this pompous

name. Bending down, he pointed to the rectangular ventilator in the massive, stone foundation, and explained: "They are embrasures. Look what a broad view they give onto both streets. Through them they held back the attacks of a whole German battalion. Two men against a whole battalion—t-w-o!"

Although the lieutenant was a seasoned soldier, not given to bursts of enthusiasm, he could not conceal his admiration. And I vividly recalled the details of the story of this house-redoubt, a story which I had heard from many people in Stalingrad—a wonderful story which reflected, as a drop of water reflects the sun, the greatness and tragedy of the entire Battle for Stalingrad.

Machine gunners Yurko Tarakul and Mikhail Nachinkin (who had both crossed the Volga a full month and a half ago with their machine-gun platoon, and therefore had the right to call themselves Stalingrad veterans) received orders to set up machine-gun nests in this house on the corner of two outlying streets. The house protruded somewhat in front of our positions and thus could serve as a good vanguard pillbox. The centre of the battle in those days had moved westward, to the Tractor Plant. A blow was not expected

here and the setting of the machine-gun nests was only a precautionary measure.

On receiving the order, Nachinkin, calm and deliberate, like all metal workers, and the small, lively Moldavian, Tarakul, who was incessantly whistling or singing or even dancing, made their way to the house and examined it thoroughly. It was a glad and a sad thing for these two men, torn away from peaceful life so long ago that they had even forgotten the cosy smell of home, to walk through the empty, well-furnished rooms, listening to the resounding echoes of their footsteps and gazing at those trifles of everyday life for which one so longs in free moments at the front. And although this house was doomed to fire or destruction, they involuntarily wiped their feet before entering and moved around cautiously, as if fearing to dirty the floor which was covered with a thick rug of dust.

They chose the end rooms of the ground floor for the machine-gun nests: from these windows you could easily follow everything taking place at the street crossing leading to the enemy's position. The back room had once been the dining room. They dragged out the dining table, divan, chairs, carefully moved aside the heavy sideboard clinking with

dishes, and began taking apart the stove in order to use the bricks for barricading the window. This task was familiar to them, and the work went smoothly.

The muscular Nachinkin, who had worked in the Minsk Machine-Building Plant before the war as a turner, tried to spare the parquet floor by walking on tiptoe, as he carried great armfuls of bricks to the window. His partner, whistling a tune, was skilfully laying the bricks in herringbone pattern to make them hold more firmly.

The battle rumbled in the distance. The crystal pendants of the chandelier tinkled melodiously in response to each shot. The dishes in the china closet rattled from the explosions, and the doors opened and closed slightly as the bombers dropped their loads over the front line. But this did not bother the soldiers in the least, no more than a city dweller is bothered by the clanking and rattling of streetcars under his window or a country man by the mooing of cows or the chirping of grasshoppers in his orchard.

They did their work, occasionally sticking their heads out of the window to see what was happening. These streets, little damaged as yet, were empty and seemed to be uninhabited.

The first embrasure was already completed. Having set up their machine gun, they began a second in the next room. But in lugging his next armful of bricks, Nachinkin suddenly noticed that Tarakul was not working; he was clamped to the sight of his machine gun, all muscles strained, staring across the street.

"Germans!" guessed Nachinkin.

He carefully put the bricks on the floor and glanced out of the unfinished masonry of the second window.

Five Germans armed with tommy guns were stealing furtively along the street towards the house. Nachinkin grabbed the rifle standing in the corner, but Tarakul snatched it out of his hands.

"Don't scare them; it's a scouting party. There'll be others behind them. Let them come closer and then give it to them..." he whispered and leaned over his machine gun.

Nachinkin, with bated breath and stealthy movements, quickly placed his machine gun in the unfinished embrasure of the next room.

At any other point along the gigantic front, two soldiers who found themselves cut off from their units in such a situation would probably have immediately made their way back to their lines, especially since no one

had ordered them to defend this house. But this was in Stalingrad, at the height of the great battle, and these two did not even think of retreating before danger. They lay down at their machine guns, put the disks into place and began to watch.

Before reaching the corner the Germans stopped to discuss something and examine the crossroad. One of them whistled softly and waved his hand. About thirty tommy gunners appeared. They also moved stealthily to the cross street and stood flat against the wall. They formed an excellent target from the house. The machine gunners could hear the broken plaster crackle under the enemies' feet, and the strange, ominous, unintelligible speech. Again the Germans sent the scouts ahead.

Two sharp volleys tore through the air. Then two more. Several Germans fell; the others fled, not understanding where the shots had come from. After running a short distance, they stopped and seemed to dissolve in the ruins.

"That's that!" shouted Tarakul triumphantly, the yellowish whites of his gypsy eyes flashing.

In his happiness, he even jumped up and danced a jig on the parquet. Nachinkin only

shook his head and silently pointed to the framework of the large stone house on the opposite side, clearly seen through the embrasures. It was not difficult to discern figures moving cautiously in the black gaps of the windows. Soon from both streets enemy soldiers came rushing to the crossroad, hugging archways, jumping into craters, hiding behind telegraph poles. They approached the house from two directions at once.

Tarakul was dumbfounded. There were many of them, but the thing which most terrified him was that they stood not only in front of him, as was usual in the battles for the city, but on both sides of him, and even behind. The first thing he wanted to do was to run—run fast—run to his own men, to save himself and his gun before it was too late—to escape from the circle he felt to be closing in on him. But he noticed his companion carrying his machine gun in a businesslike manner to the next room and realized that he intended to cover the flank. His comrade's calm behaviour brought him to his senses.

Having overcome the instinctive fear that had seized him, Tarakul pressed against the machine-gun sight and began shooting short volleys at the Germans running across along the street. Those who had settled opposite

opened fire. But Tarakul felt that he was invulnerable behind the brick masonry. And seeing that the enemy's bullets only raised clouds of mortar, ricocheting with an angry whistle, without harming him, his fear passed. And as often happens at critical moments at the front, his fear was replaced by confidence and even a calm joy when the Germans (there were lots of them out there on the street) ran back, jumping over the dead, paying no attention to the wounded, fleeing in panic from his machine-gun fire. Now Tarakul fired cold-bloodedly. And every time a grey figure fell to the ground he shouted:

“So that's that!”

In the next room Nachinkin's machine gun was working—in the literal sense of the word. The former turner, coolheaded as ever, introduced an element of calculation even into his fighting. He was economic with ammunition, shooting volleys of only five cartridges, and then only when he sighted several figures at once. He was the first to repulse the attack in his street. Then he brought his rifle to the aid of his comrade and, settling himself at the embrasure, he carefully took aim and began shooting those occupying the house across the way. The enemy replied with tommy-gun fire. They aimed above the unblocked window.

The room became filled with dust and whizzing bullets. The machine gunners lay down on the floor. Then the firing ceased.

"You remain here," said Nachinkin and crawled back to his gun.

When the attack had been repulsed and silence reigned, Tarakul in his turn visited his friend. Now he was aware of his own strength, and in order to give vent to this abundant strength and to the joy swelling in his breast, he gave Nachinkin a resounding slap on the back. The latter angrily threw off his arm and set to rolling himself a cigarette. Tarakul noticed that this man whose coolness and matter-of-factness had so recently inspired him with courage, was now pale and his fingers were trembling, scattering the tobacco on his knees.

"Did you see! Did you see how they... how we chased them back!"

"What are you so happy about, do you think that they fled and that's all?... Don't worry, they'll come back.... Are you married? Have you any children?"

"I'm single," answered Tarakul, not even hearing the question clearly. "How they ran!"

"I'm married.... I have four kids.... Well, what are you sitting here for? Get back to your machine gun!"

And again they crawled through the rooms, each to his own embrasure.

Nachinkin's words came true. Only now did the battle really begin. An hour later the Germans made another sortie, then two short strenuous attacks—one after the other. The machine gunners beat them off. They became more skilful with experience, and the thought of holding out until reserves came never left them. Their position was convenient and they adjusted themselves to the situation (in so far as it is possible to adjust oneself to such a situation). And more and more grey figures, looking like bundles of discarded rags, dotted the neutral strip of deserted road overgrown with grass blighted by the morning frost.

The Germans then brought up trench mortars. They began shelling the house from the garden opposite and continued the bombardment for some twenty minutes. About a dozen small mines exploded on the upper floor. Everything in the house was overturned, broken, mixed with fallen plaster. But when the Germans again rushed into attack, two machine guns held them back with a deadly curtain of fire. During the shelling the machine gunners had sat in the narrow bathroom, and as soon as it was over they crawled across the debris to their embrasures.

It is hard to say what happened to the Germans. Perhaps they imagined they were fighting a whole garrison, or that they had bumped into a camouflaged pillbox, or perhaps their fighting spirit was simply broken by the stubbornness of these two men. However that may be, they abandoned the attempt to break into the house. Instead, they brought up three heavy guns and began firing point-blank at the building.

After each explosion, Tarakul would shout to his friend in the next room:

"I'm alive, how about you?"

And the other would answer peevishly, as if brushing away a mosquito:

"What could happen to me!"

But after an exceptionally severe explosion, which shook the whole house and filled it with suffocating clouds of dust, Nachinkin did not answer his comrade. Tarakul rushed to him. Among the broken furniture, plaster and brick, lay the strapping machine gunner with wounds in both legs. He tried to get up but fell back, opening his mouth as if choking for air.

"Wounded," he muttered through his teeth.

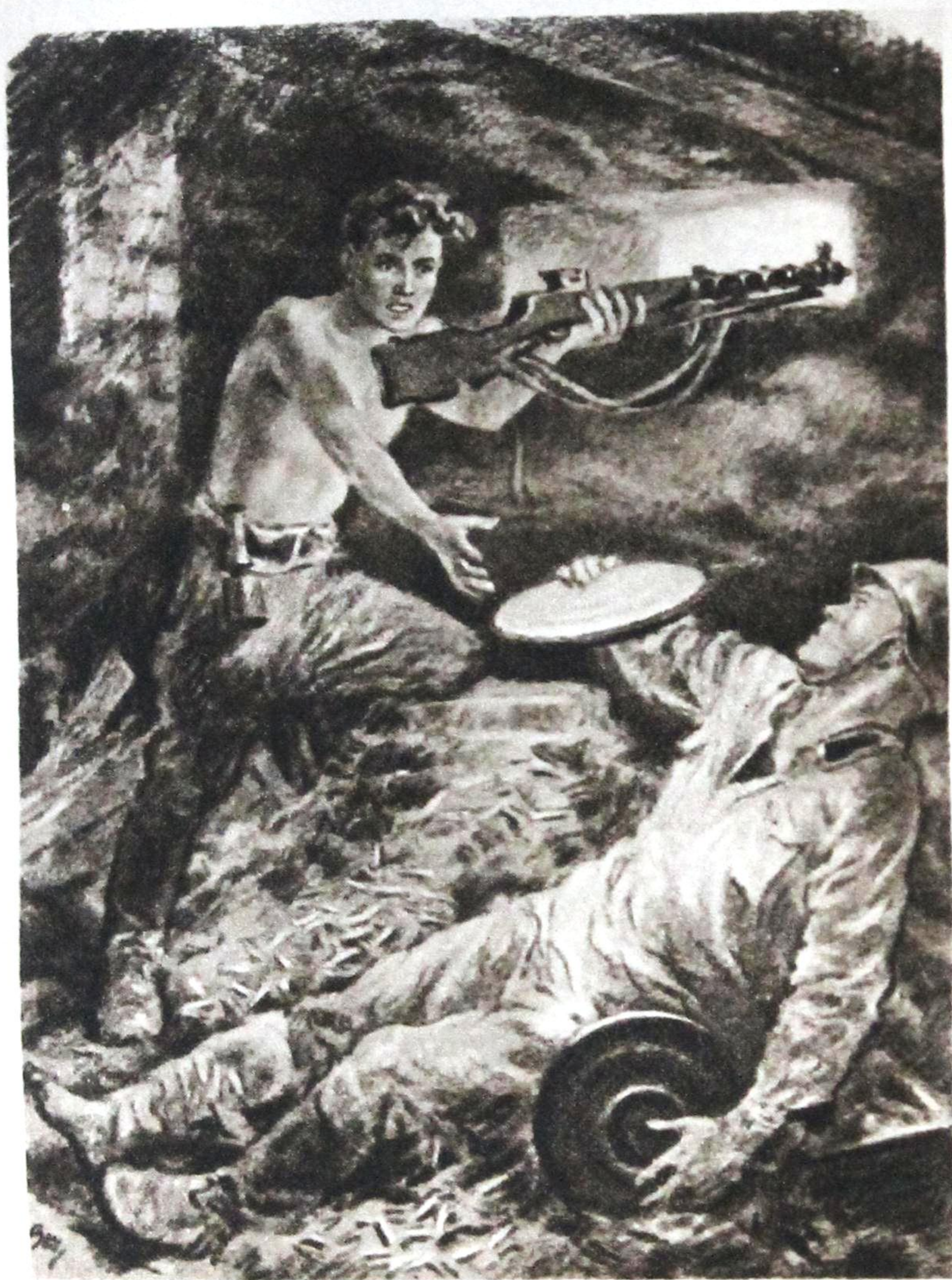
"What's to be done?" flashed through Tarakul's brain. It turned out that he was alone.

Run? But his pal was wounded. And the machine guns? And how could he run with such a fellow on his back? His mind worked clearly and rapidly, as is usual in such cases. The next moment, Tarakul was already dragging his friend to the cellar where they had already taken the boxes of cartridges—just in case, as the businesslike Nachinkin had said. Tarakul dragged the machine guns and disks down below also. He placed them in the same order as they had been above, sticking the barrels through the rectangular ventilators.

The fire sector of their guns was now smaller, but the massive vaults of the old cellar protected them securely. When everything had been done, Tarakul felt very tired. He threw himself on the floor and for some time lay still, pressing his hot forehead against the cold stone.

Just at this moment came a series of explosions which caused the whole house to shake and everything to crash overhead. They were caused by bomb bursts. The Germans had called dive bombers to their aid, and one explosion brought down the house. The cellar was buried under a mountain of bricks and rubble, but its massive walls held.

Tarakul and his wounded comrade remained alive but stunned, deafened, shell-



shocked, buried under the debris, cut off from the world. On coming to, Tarakul looked around and examined the cellar.

"A tomb," he said thickly, turning to his comrade who was lying by the wall with his eyes closed.

Nachinkin opened his eyes.

"A fort," he answered simply. He looked at one embrasure, then at the other and added: "And what a fort! Only the garrison is rather small."

Despite the hopelessness of the situation, they now had one advantage: they did not have to fear an attack from the rear. The heap of ruins safely protected them from all shells. Only the direct hit of a bomb could hurt them now. And what seasoned soldier fears a direct hit!

Yurko Tarakul was seized by a desire for activity. He placed the machine guns more conveniently in the embrasures and put boxes under them, making it possible to sit down at the job. He dragged the case of cartridges over to his wounded friend who offered to load the disks. Tarakul himself ran from embrasure to embrasure keeping an eye on what was going on out in the street.

It appeared that they greatly astonished the Germans with their persistence. Even long aft-

er the house had been demolished, they feared to approach it. When they did finally make an attack, they were met with the fire of the same two machine guns, stubbornly banging away from somewhere under the ruins. . . .

Tarakul and his wounded comrade fired. But in spite of his fame in the company as a man of iron, the wounded man quickly weakened and lost consciousness, falling helpless near the embrasure. Then Tarakul ran from one machine gun to the other, keeping both streets under fire. He sweated in the damp cellar. He threw off his greatcoat, then his tunic, then his shirt, and, naked to the waist, his face haggard and black from smoke, dust, and gunpowder, his hair damp and matted, he shot crazily and in complete self-oblivion until Nachinkin regained consciousness and staggered along the wall to his machine gun.

Thus for two days these two Soviet soldiers, buried under the ruins pitted their strength against that of the German unit trying to capture this formless mound of bricks and plaster, turned into a fortress by human will-power. To seize these ruins became a matter of prestige to the Germans.

It became harder and harder for the "garrison" to hold out. More than a day had passed

since they had divided the last rusk which had been found in the knapsack of the practical Nachinkin. There was no water. During the night they licked the rime which formed on the walls of the cellar. The last pinch of tobacco, shaken out of pocket seams, had long since been smoked. And what was still worse, the cartridges were ending.

"If they bring in tanks, then things will be bad," said Nachinkin when they opened the cartridge case and reloaded the empty disks.

Nachinkin was already so weak that the tight spring of the disk mechanism kept slipping out of his hands.

"Well, if we must perish, let it be with music!" answered Tarakul, blinking his yellowish eyes.

He was also weak from hunger and lack of sleep, but could still hold out. In order to economize the energy in his weakening body, he would remain utterly still at the embrasure for hours at a time, and then it seemed as though only his eyes and ears were alive.

"You have music on the brain. Not with music but with good sense. What's the use of making a lot of senseless noise? What's it good for? A fellow can only live once!"

Nachinkin continued to reload the disks. With his friend's help he even managed dur-

ing the most difficult moments to get to his machine gun and shoot. But thoughts of death came ever more often to his mind. And he wanted to tell his comrade, this young Moldavian grape grower to whom he had been joined by fate, something great and important, something wise, something that was maturing in his heart and which he did not know how to put into words.

"A man must not die until he has done everything, get me? Everything he could.... Everything," he said finally, tortured by lack of words and fearing that his friend would not understand him.

He made Yurko learn the address of his family and the name of his good friend, the director of the factory he had worked in before the war. He made the soldier promise if he survived the war, he would look up his family and tell his wife about these last hours; that he would find the director and tell him how the Minsk turner had perished in Stalingrad.

Nachinkin had had a misunderstanding with this director. They had been what you might call friends, but during the first days of the war, when the factory was evacuated to the east, the turner had refused to go along. He had declared he was going to stay and de-

fend the city. Then the director had said something which had offended Nachinkin so deeply that he could not forgive him. The story of how private Nachinkin had fought, was to shame the director and give the lie to his insulting words.

But like real soldiers, they did not talk about death; they talked about when and from whom they could expect help.

And in spite of everything, they believed that this help would come.

And actually now when the firing of their machine guns grew weaker because of lack of cartridges, trench mortars rumbled behind them and the black smoke of frequent explosions rose in front of the house, blocking German access to it.

Hungry, thirsty, completely worn out by lack of sleep, they listened to the close thunder, as to the voice of a friend, promising help. This din seemed to contact them with their own soldiers, from whom they were separated by a mountain of rubble and a few dozen metres of no man's land.

On the third night, just before dawn, a startling thing occurred. Tarakul, dozing with open eyes near the embrasures, suddenly heard a strange human voice. He thought perhaps he was delirious, and leaned his forehead against

the cold, rime-covered stone, licking some hoarfrost which tasted of dampness and mould. No, he was not hearing things: there was a voice. Yurko glanced at his comrade. Nachinkin was asleep, holding a disk in one hand and a handful of cartridges in the other.

No, he was not speaking. A wooden, inhuman voice stubbornly muttered into his ears familiar and yet unintelligible words: something about bread, meat and butter. Tarakul became frightened. He poked his sleeping comrade. Nachinkin listened. The shadow of a smile appeared on his blackened, shrunken lips.

"Fascists. They're shouting to us, trying to convert us."

"Surrender, you'll get good treatment. . . . You'll have good things to eat!" yelled the expressionless voice from out of the morning shadows.

"They want to buy us with a piece of bread. And where? In this city! Idiots!" said Nachinkin softly. "Take a look at what fascism does to a man. He can't rise higher than his belly. And they were the people who invented the Diesel!"

When the fear of the unintelligible left him, Tarakul felt a flow of irrepressible fury. He went to his machine gun and sent a long

volley in the direction of the voice. He shot until the last cartridge fell to the stone floor, ringing in the silence which settled down with the last shot.

In recalling the days of this extraordinary duel, Yurko Tarakul could not say exactly for how long they had defended the house. In general, he could not remember anything about the last day, except that he had shot from both machine guns, not seeing anything before him but the cross streets, not thinking of anything but that the Germans had to be held back. Only this thought was clearly printed in his consciousness, foggy from hunger and fatigue.

They held out until somewhere far-off through the frequent firing they heard a "hurrah," which drew closer and louder; until the heavy steps of the attacking infantry sounded on the ruins of the pavements, and until our own, dear, familiar greatcoats and clumsy soldiers' boots flashed in the embrasures.

Then he left his machine guns and began shaking his limp comrade shouting only:

"Our people have come!"

A fresh regiment of reserves had crossed the Volga during the night, pushed back the Germans, and cleaned up the cross street. Soldiers from Lieutenant Shokhenko's platoon ran to the ruins. They could hear the weak voices

of their comrades coming through the embrasures. But the sappers had to be called and they had to dig for a long time and even dynamite the stones in order to get Nachinkin and Tarakul out. Someone (the chief of the sappers directing this excavation, it seems), called the ruins of the house jokingly, "Tarakul's redoubt." And this name, given as a joke, took root, appeared in the press, and later was marked on war maps....

I saw this remarkable place with my own eyes. By the light of flashlights we made our way down to the cellar through gaps rent by the sappers. The bluish light of the moon pierced the embrasures in two shining rays which spread a white light over the floor, revealing the thick sprinkling of empty cartridge shells, already turning green. A bloody bandage lay in the corner. Mikhail Nachinkin had probably lain there. Through the embrasure one got a glimpse of ruined walls covered with silvery rime against the slate-black background of the sky, suggesting theatre settings. Over them shone the stars, sharp and cold. The afterglow of fires hung heavy over the earth.

When our eyes became accustomed to the semidarkness of the cellar, we were able to make out a sentence carved on the grey frost-covered wall. The lieutenant turned his flash-

light on it. "Guardsmen Yurko Tarakul and Mikhail Nachinkin here stood unto the death. In holding out, they conquered death."

"Our commissar wrote it," said the lieutenant, and once more he read: "In holding out, they conquered death."

"Imagine their fear—facing the enemy all alone on nights like this."

"Fear? That's not the word. We've forgotten such words here. . . . Alone? That's another thing, and that's bad, especially in battle," said Shokhenko. "But we know no such word as fear."

I wanted to write a detailed account of this one Stalingrad house for the sake of those who, in generations to come, will read the epic story of the defence of the city where the word "fear" was forgotten; to write it as I heard it from Tarakul and his comrades-in-arms.



We Are Soviet People

THE GIRL looked about nineteen. She was slim and graceful. Her olive face had not quite lost the rounded contours of childhood, the wide eyes, large and clear, fringed with long lashes, looked at you gaily and wonderingly as though asking: is everything really so marvelous, comrades—or do I simply imagine it?

It was only the too elaborate, high coiffure of her luxurious dark chestnut hair that somehow spoiled this fair image, like a jarring note in a fine song.

She wore a summery flowered dress, with a gold chain around her sunburnt neck, which carried the charming young head so proudly.

She must have realized that she looked out of place among all those sunburnt people in their washed-out, sun-bleached tunics, and so

she had thrown someone's greatcoat around her shoulders, and notwithstanding the sultry heat of the windless August evening, she kept it on as she sat outside the whitewashed Ukrainian cottage.

She was watching with avid interest the life of the ordinary village where headquarters were located. With the same affectionate eagerness she looked at the faded, oil-stained overalls of the drivers who were fussing with the engine of an overturned jeep in the shade of a cherry orchard; at the army postman with his cap over one ear and his bulging satchel over one shoulder, as he passed her with the solemn and important look peculiar to army postmen when they are carrying a large batch of fresh mail; at the chief of the Military Intelligence Department, a stout colonel, spruce and neatly belted who was pacing in creaking boots up and down on the other side of the garden fence, engrossed in his own thoughts; at the men of the guard, lounging on the dusty green-sward at the back of the house, taking turns reading aloud the letters they had just received from home.

"I keep looking at everything as if I'd been starved, and still I can't get enough. You can never understand that feeling. Only those can understand it who have been torn away for a

long time from their own folks, from all that they're used to, that's near and dear to them, and have had to plunge into that alien and evil world!" she said in a low rich voice.

The childlike look that had illumined her face a moment before was swept away as though by the wind, and I fancied she gave a little shudder of disgust under the rough overcoat.

It was beyond belief that this girl, so tenderly youthful and lighthearted, followed the most dangerous and responsible of all military professions, that she was the nameless heroine who, on the other side of the front line, risking her life every minute, supplied our headquarters with information that helped the command forestall enemy movements. Those engaged in such work are close, tight-lipped people, as a rule. But they were ungrudging in their praise of this girl.

She went under the name of "Birchtree." I don't know how it happened to be given her, but it would have been hard to find a better one. She really reminded you of a graceful birch sapling, one that quivers with every leaf in the faintest breeze. And nothing about her appearance betrayed the cool courage, the will power, the confident, calculating cunning that are the indispensable qualities of anyone in her

profession. It was probably this that ensured her unfailing success on the most difficult missions.

The chief of the Military Intelligence Department, after asking for my solemn promise never to divulge her real name, told me her war biography.

The only daughter of an eminent scientist, she had grown up in an old family, received an excellent education, had been taught music and singing, and from childhood had spoken Ukrainian, Russian, French and German with equal facility. When the war broke out, she was in her last year at the university. She was specializing in philology, being particularly interested in European literature of the Renaissance. She had even written an article on the plays of Racine which was published under a pseudonym in an Academy periodical.

At the outbreak of the war she had, against her parents' will, refused to take her final examinations, and entered a training course for nurses. She had decided to go to the front. But before she had finished the course the enemy advanced on her home town, and fighting took place on its outskirts. For some time she and her comrades from the training course helped carry the wounded off the battlefield and

worked in the evacuation hospital. The enemy was closing in around the town. The order came to evacuate. Her parents insisted that she should accompany them.

“It is an old saying that from him to whom much has been given, much is expected,” her father said. “Any girl can carry wounded off the field, but remember, the state has gone to great expense to give you an education. You know languages as few know them. It is your duty to render a greater service to the government by working in the rear.”

The girl well knew that her father was not sincere in his arguments; he could not really be thinking this. But she did not wish to hurt him, so she said gently:

“Papa, I have heard that right now even the girders of the Palace of the Soviets are being smelted in order to make shells and tank armour. We have to win at any price. This is no time for petty calculations.”

She did not evacuate with her parents, but her father's words made her think. It was true that she knew languages, could very likely be of more use to her country in this way than in looking after the wounded. With this in mind, she set out for the District Committee of the Communist Party.

The town was to be evacuated in a few

hours. At Party headquarters, weary people, crushed with grief and fatigue, were burning documents. Dry ashes flew about the rooms and rustled underfoot. Armed volunteers from the workers' battalions kept coming in and out. Telephones were ringing furiously. Nobody had any time for her. Nobody wanted to listen to this slender, pretty, well-dressed girl. Though up to that time she had been rather diffident with strangers, now she showed her true mettle. Having fooled one, got rid of another with a joke and simply pushed the third out of her way, she finally managed to force her way into the office of the secretary of the District Party Committee. She told him her name, which was fairly well known in the town, and informed him that she had an excellent knowledge of foreign languages and wanted him to give her some military assignment.

"What's that? So you're Professor X's daughter, eh? Why haven't you evacuated?" the secretary asked, making an effort to tear himself away from all the problems connected with evacuation. He examined her papers attentively, and then, suddenly remembering something, he asked: "Do you know German?"

"Yes, I know it as well as I know my own Ukrainian."

The secretary glanced dubiously again at the slim young figure, the rounded childlike face:

"The mission I'm thinking about may prove very difficult and, I must tell you straight, very dangerous."

"I am ready...."

He asked the others to go out, then picked up the receiver of the field telephone on his desk and called a number.

"Can you hear me? This is . . . yes, I have a suitable person here for the job," he said to someone. "Knows German perfectly. Very suitable, I know her parents. Splendid, devoted, loyal people. I'll send her to you right away. Yes, I've warned her already and I'll do it again." He replaced the receiver and looked her in the eye with a kindly, attentive scrutiny. "Very well, I shall contact you with one of our comrades who is remaining here for the purpose of carrying on underground work. But perhaps you haven't the faintest idea of what you are taking on. Your life will be at stake every minute."

"Please don't waste time; I have already given you my answer," replied the girl.

And that was how the daughter of the noted professor remained in her native town after it had been occupied by the Germans.

She was not the only one left here for underground work, but to her had been allotted the most dangerous and responsible job. Some had to watch the movements of the Germans and the traitors, others were assigned to blow up stores and dumps, put locomotives out of commission, while still others had to hunt down fascist officials. "Birchtree," who knew German so well, was instructed by the underground committee to act the part of a pampered young lady, the daughter of well-known parents, a girl who intensely admired everything western and had no desire to give up her comfort for the sake of some abstract idea, abandon everything going eastwards into the unknown. The fascist colonel who took up his quarters in the absent professor's spacious flat immediately felt attracted to his young hostess. Of an evening she played excerpts from Wagner's operas on the piano and read Goethe's verses. The colonel introduced her to his friends, important staff officers, and to the general who was his chief.

The Ukrainian Fräulein proved an immediate success. The daughter of a professor and the descendant of wealthy Ukrainian landlords, as the colonel hinted, was vastly superior to the fat, vulgar, strident and stupid Nazi ladies of their circle. The officers did their utmost to please her, and never could they have

guessed where this charming girl, "the descendant of wealthy landlords," betook herself twice a week with her gay sunshade, handbag, and a copy of the Führer's *Mein Kampf*, presented to her by the colonel with his autograph.

She went to the home of a shoemaker who lived in a whitewashed cottage on the riverbank beyond the town. Here she took out of her bag some smart slippers worn down at the heels, and, first making sure that no one was watching, wept her tears of indignation, rage, and disgust on the broad shoulder of the bearded old shoemaker. In this clean, simple little cottage surrounded by an orchard, her strained nerves found relief. The flirtatious, fashionable young thing, so charming and coquettish, so eager to amuse the coarse, complacent Germans, became herself again, a Soviet girl, the citizen of her captured but unconquered town—sincere, suffering, and full of hate.

"Oh, how sick I am of it! If you only knew, Uncle Levko, how I loathe living amongst them, listening to their bragging, smiling at them when I want to choke them, shaking hands with those who deserve to be shot—no, not shot—hanged!"

The "shoemaker," an old Bolshevik who had worked in the underground during the Civil War, soothed and comforted her as best

he could. Then they sat down in the little back room to draw up a report of all she had heard and seen. They made a meal of cold jellied meat, pickled tomatoes, sour milk, and "tea" of lime flowers, sweetened with saccharine. And in these homely surroundings her sick and lonely soul found comfort and healing. A little later a smart, carefree girl climbed the hill back to the town again, twirling her gay sunshade and humming the German song, *Lili Marlene*, while the hungry townsfolk watched her with hatred in their eyes. These glances of hatred, the necessity of enduring insult in silence, always in silence, fearing to disclose to these people even by the merest hint of who she was, why she was here, and for what she was fighting—this was the hardest part of all.

Her nerves were steady; she played her part superbly and was proving of inestimable value. But at last even her nerves began to give way. It was becoming increasingly difficult to act her role and disguise her feelings. When she went to report to the "shoemaker" she implored him to relieve her, to give her some other—any other mission. Her idea of rest and relief was action—raids on enemy transports, burning arsenals, blowing up trains, fighting with a gun in her hands like the other participants in the underground movement. But at

that time the headquarters of a whole German army group was located in the town, the information she could get was even more important than usual, and the "shoemaker" was obliged to refuse her request and remain firm in sending her back again.

Finally the headquarters moved away, and the "shoemaker" promised that in a couple of days she might disappear. Then came disaster. The colonel quartered in her flat was promoted to the rank of general. He celebrated the occasion by getting drunk and broke into her room that night with a bottle of champagne. Beside herself with indignation, she struck him full in the face. He only roared with laughter, kissed her hand, and turned the other cheek. Those wonderful little hands could not insult a German general, one who had conquered six countries and was now fighting in the seventh! And she was the best of all the trophies he had annexed! He offered her his hand and his heart.

The girl was horrified, shaken with loathing from head to foot. The new general followed her about on his knees, clutching at her dress. She tried to escape from him into another room. He burst in there as well, boasting hoarsely that the Soviets were in their death agony, that fighting was going on in the streets of

Moscow, that here in the fertile Ukraine all the Germans would be given estates and she would be his wife—ho-ho, the wife of a German landowner! And all those peasants who set themselves up as the lords of life and babbled about Socialism would be their serfs, the draught horses on their land. The drunken fascist was insulting her fellow countrymen—and the girl could not stand it. Her will gave way. Snatching his silver-mounted dagger, topped with the spread eagle, she plunged it up to the hilt into the general's throat.

All the military and civil police, all the gendarmes and special SS troops who arrived in the town scoured the place for a month, searching every street, every house, making endless raids. But the girl was not to be found; she was safely across the front line.

Once among her own people, she set herself patiently and perseveringly to learn all that might be of use to her in carrying out the hardest and most dangerous work she could do for her country.

The trail of the noted professor's daughter who had killed a newly-promoted Hitlerite general was lost in the large Ukrainian town. A short time later the military *Kommandant* of Kharkov engaged a very pretty interpreter by the name of Erna Weiner. *Fräulein* Weiner's

fate awakened the sympathy of the *Kommandant*, the last scion of a decayed branch of Baltic barons who, in addition to his Nazi ideas, had personal grudges against the Soviet regime. Erna Weiner informed the chief that she was the daughter of a prominent German colonist of the Odessa Region. Her father had once owned orchards, vineyards, melon plantations, and had hired labourers in the summer season by the hundred, had bought grain on a large scale and been the owner of a flour mill as well. But of all this he had been ruthlessly deprived by the Bolsheviks. Since then he had dragged out a wretched existence, but still had contrived to put a little bit by in a safe spot, and out of these small means had given his children an education. Eventually he had been arrested for his sympathies to the new Germany, sympathies which, as an honest, straightforward man, he had not been able and had not cared to hide. . . .

Fräulein Erna, who had suffered so much from the Bolsheviks, soon became the head interpreter in the *Kommandantur*, and was subsequently transferred to the garrison commander's office.

Her new chief, an SS Brigadenführer, also displayed sympathy for the unfortunate Fräulein. Her flawless German, her ability to sing old

Bavarian songs, for which the sentimental butchers had so strong a predilection, her ability to play the piano, brought her many admirers. "Yes, old Johann Weiner managed to give his children a splendid education, even in this incomprehensible country!" they marvelled. And even when the Germans missed some important documents, or it became plain to them that the Soviet Command knew far too much about their secret plans, not the faintest shadow of suspicion fell on Erna Weiner. But what a price this girl paid for the fascist secrets she secured for her country! She now had to be present at highly confidential interrogations and see the German hangmen torture Soviet people under sentence of death, translate their last cries of agony, their curses, listen to insults from them. Only love for her country, a boundless and all-embracing love, gave her strength for this task. And none but the liaison man of the underground movement, a grim warrior racked with rheumatism who sat at his radio in the basement of a ruined house and never stirred abroad, ever heard her complain. Pale as the moon on a chilly night, hardly able to move, deprived as he had been of sun and fresh air for over a year, this man comforted her as best he could with his clumsy soldier's sayings and served her as an example of devo-

tion to a great cause. His quiet courage was her mainstay.

The last and worst ordeal of all awaited "Birchtree" a few weeks before the taking of Kharkov. She told me about it herself, as we sat outside the whitewashed cottage on a fine August evening.

"You know, of course, how nervous they were when Konyev's army, breaking through to Belgorod, was marching on Kharkov from the east. Heavens, the things that went on there! It reminded you of an anthill into which a burning brand had been shoved. The soldiers don't count—they're mere automatons. But if you could have seen their superiors! Forgetting even ordinary appearances of decency, they feverishly packed up pictures, museum treasures, antiques, furniture—all that they had stolen and taken to their own quarters. It was all shipped to the rear right before the eyes of the soldiers. And as for the rumours! It wasn't a headquarters, but a market for the exchange of rumours, each one wilder than the other. Particularly about Soviet aircraft. It was said that huge new air units had arrived from the Far East. Tens of thousands of planes of types never before seen with some monstrous new armaments. All the officers used to go down to the basement to sleep. It surprised

even me to find out how white-livered, petty, and cowardly they turned out to be in a tight place. And I rejoiced. When I came to work in the morning I would say to my chief in a pitiful voice: 'Herr Brigadenführer, does this mean it's all over with us? They'll kill me when they get here!...' I noticed that he turned pale, but he still tried to put a bold face on. 'Oh, Fräulein, Germany is still so strong! Perhaps even too strong. Suffers from being too full-blooded.' He wound up with assuring me that no matter what happened, I would always be able to get away in his car.

"One night I was aroused and told to come to his office. He was extremely excited and in a very good humour. He told me there was to be a very important interrogation—his whole career depended upon it. Oh, if you only knew how much they all think of their careers! Well, when I heard that, I went cold all over: whom could they have caught? I knew that the Khar'kov underground, which kept the Germans in a constant state of intense dread, had become particularly active, and I was always afraid some of them might be caught. My chief paced up and down the office. Special preparations were being made; the table was laid; wine, fruit and sweets were set out on it. The sight of these things made me feel more miserable than

ever. For whom could it be? For whom? What did all these special preparations mean?

“ ‘Some big chief from the army expected?’ I asked as casually as I could, taking my seat in the corner I usually occupied during interrogations.

“ ‘Nonsense! Would I be likely to go to this expense for any of those upstarts from the army?’ the chief retorted. ‘This is for someone far more important, and far more interesting. We’ve had a capital haul today. This is going to mean the end of the abominable suspense. We’ll find out what surprise they’ve been cooking up for us. And it may spoil their game, oho!’

“I decided that some important Soviet officer must have been captured. But I was very much surprised when I saw the major, the chief’s assistant and not the chief himself, sit down at the table. Then a stretcher was carried in under escort and set down beside the guest table. The tommy gunners were just going to take their posts at the door when the major dismissed them with a gesture. I could not see the man lying on the stretcher. Meanwhile the major had put on one of his most ingratiating smiles and asked me to tell our ‘guest’ in Russian that he himself was a pilot and was delighted to welcome a gallant colleague, who,

judging by his decorations, must be a famous Russian ace. When he wanted to, this major knew very well how to assume an air of geniality, and even of straightforward simplicity, though he was one of the most loathsome creatures I ever saw there—and I saw plenty, I can tell you!

“Then I had a better look at the man on the stretcher: he was young, very young, and he was wearing a faded tunic like yours, with three military Orders of the Red Banner and some other decorations. His shoulder straps were those of a lieutenant in the air force. And his look . . . excuse me . . . just a moment. . . .”

She turned white, whiter than the wall of the house we were sitting next to, and she was breathing hard, biting her lip as though fighting down great physical pain. Then she gave a shake of her head and explained:

“It’s all nerves. . . . His legs were in plaster, his head was bandaged, and he looked at me askance with his large grey eyes, so candid and suffering.

“Please, Fräulein, tell our colleague here that an unarmed adversary is no longer an enemy for us, that for the new Germany the conceptions of courage and a soldier’s honour exceed national bounds. And tell him that as the right-hand man of the chief of the gar-

rison, er-er . . . and a pilot by profession, I'll be delighted to have a wineglass . . . er-er, perhaps that wouldn't be quite Russian style—to have a good mug of old wine with him.'

"As I was translating this, the grey eyes of the pilot rested on my face. And there was such hatred in them, no, not exactly hatred—such scorn and loathing, that the tears rose to my eyes against my will.

" 'Tell him to stop playing the fool. He won't get anything out of me anyway and I don't want his wine. But I could use a cigarette.'

"The major beamed, jumped up and offered his cigarette case. The pilot raised himself on one elbow, took a cigarette, and drew at it greedily. They were both silent. I could hear the faint crackle of the tobacco in the cigarettes. After a while the major stood up, clicked his heels smartly, introduced himself, and announced politely that he would be glad to know with whom he had the honour of becoming acquainted.

" 'Old devices. I've nothing to say, so they may as well take me away,' replied the pilot, turning his back on the major.

"And no matter how much the major tried to make him talk, he lay with his face to the wall without uttering a sound. I saw that the German was losing patience, biting his lips, the

muscles working in his face. I feared that he would suddenly let himself go and then—well, I knew what he was capable of! But they must have been in desperate need of information about our aircraft, for he kept a tight rein on himself, ordered the prisoner to be taken away, and even wished him good night. But as soon as the door had closed behind him, he let loose a torrent of violent curses, tossed off a glass of brandy, and flung himself down on the couch, looking absolutely done in, his eyes quite vacant. The chief came in, I was allowed to go, and was taken home.

“I never closed my eyes that night, though I felt worn out. That pilot—I kept seeing his eyes on me, and the firm, ringing tones of his young voice remained in my ears. Next morning I was just getting ready to go and warn our people that a Soviet ace had been shot down while flying over our town and had been taken prisoner, when a car drove up to the door. The major himself was in it. ‘Orders are that we must worm all we can out of that fellow about Soviet aircraft. Information has come to hand that he belongs to the new units just flown here. Fräulein Erna, you will have to talk to this damned Bolshevik. Tell him whatever you like, only drag everything you can out of him. You’ll have more money than you know what

to do with; you'll even get decorated with the Iron Cross!

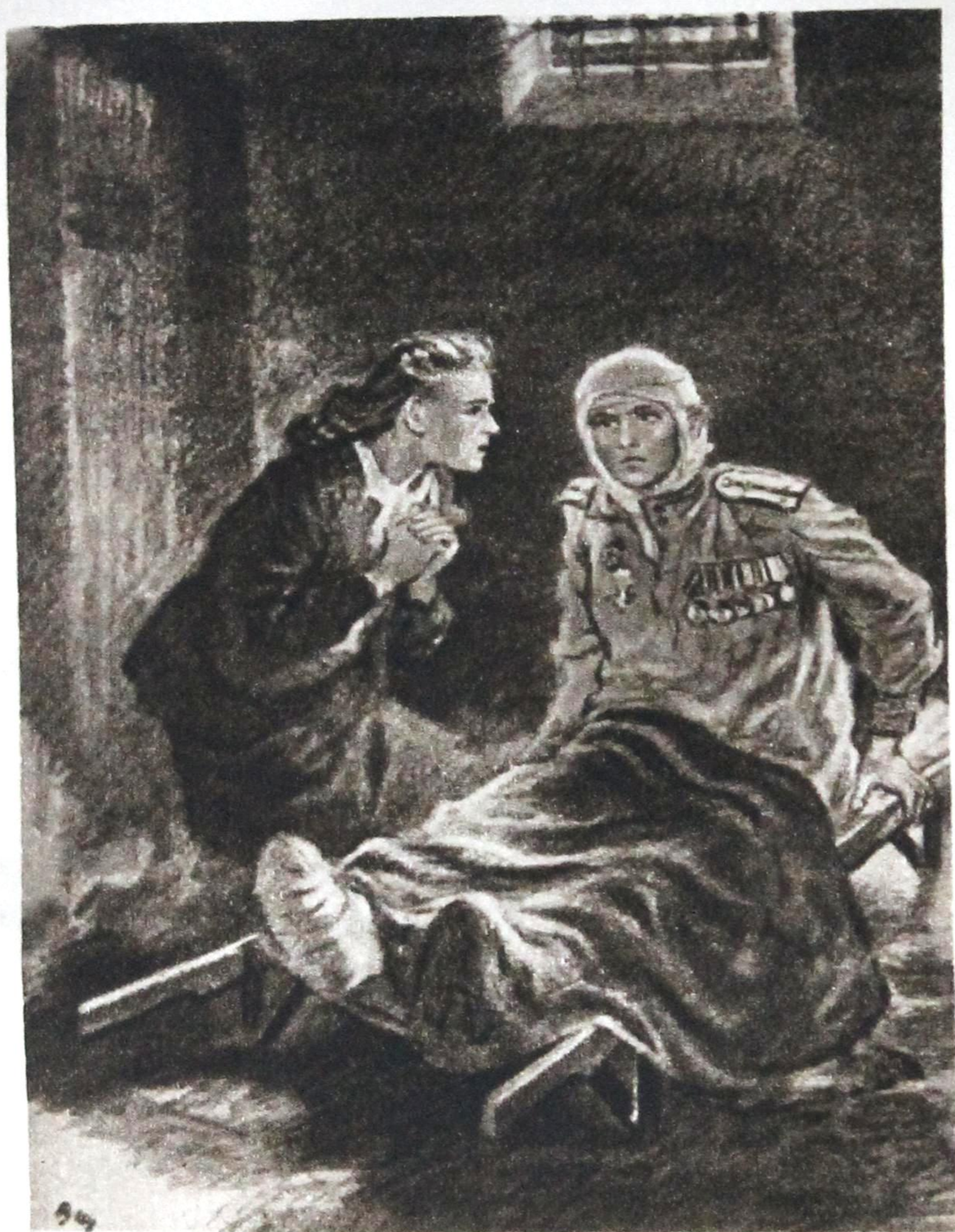
"I had never yet seen this cool and calculating combination of hangman and climber in such a state. He was so excited that he even let it out that a general in their air force who needed the information without fail had flown to Kharkov from headquarters. I had no alternative. It would even be an advantage to see the pilot alone. I might be able to warn him. But when I remembered the look in his eyes even I, accustomed as I was to facing death, felt afraid, actually afraid, to enter his cell. You can imagine what he must have thought of me!

"Still, I took a firm hold on myself, and when the door clanged to behind me I forced myself to go over to him. He looked even thinner and his face was more hollow than the day before; his eyes were open wider and assumed the same scornful expression when they looked at me. I fancied that a shudder ran through him as I approached.

" 'How do you feel? Has the doctor been to see you?' I asked, simply to start the conversation somehow.

" 'They had no luck, so they're setting their Alsatian bitch on me,' he said with a sneer.

"I blushed. I could not keep back the tears,



and he must have seen them in my eyes. His voice was very weak—that night must have taken a lot out of him, but he went on as firmly and cruelly as before:

“ ‘What makes you blush? Creatures who sell themselves shouldn’t blush! Just wait till you fall into our hands, you’ll get a lesson you won’t forget.’

“I could hardly keep myself from falling on my knees there and then and telling him the whole story, so agonizing was it to hear those insults from his lips. And he went on, his voice rising:

“ ‘You think you’ll be able to retreat with the Germans and get away from us, don’t you? We’ll catch up, don’t worry! We’ll hunt you down in Berlin itself. You’ll never escape us; there’ll be no place for you to hide!’

“And he laughed—not nervously, he didn’t seem to have any nerves—he laughed triumphantly, gloatingly, as though he wasn’t lying helpless, in bandages, dying in an enemy prison, but had won through to Berlin as a victor, wreaking vengeance and meting out justice. And then I darted closer to him and, throwing caution to the winds, whispered:

“ ‘They don’t know anything. They want to find out from you about some new air units. They’re all in a terrible panic here. They’re

'frightened, frightened out of their lives. Don't tell them anything, not a word. Be particularly careful with that redheaded major you saw yesterday—he's a dreadful creature. . . .'

"He recoiled and listened in astonishment.

" 'So that's it!' he said, and then again: 'So that's it!' and his eyes looked a little kinder, but were still watchful, scrutinizing me closely. 'Well, such things do happen,' and he smiled without his former malevolence. Giving me a wink, he suddenly shouted at the top of his voice: 'Clear out of here, you dirty spy! I'm not going to tell you anything—you or your bosses, either! You won't get a word out of me!'

"He went on for some time, shouting so that he could be heard all over the prison. Then, dropping his voice, he asked me:

" 'So you're? . . .'

"I nodded. I was trembling from head to foot and my teeth were chattering.

" 'Listen, calm yourself,' he said, 'but tell me honestly—will they finish me off?'

" 'If you won't talk they'll shoot you,' I told him, and we looked at each other questioningly again.

" 'That's a pity, a great pity. I haven't seen much of life yet and I'd like to have lived a bit longer! . . . Well, go away now, go away.'

“‘Isn’t there anything I could pass on for you—over there?’ I asked.

“‘Your eyes look so tortured, I almost believe you,’ he replied. ‘Almost. And still I mustn’t. I won’t tell you anything, it’ll be better for us both—so now goodbye....’ He sighed and then cursed and swore at me all over the prison again.

“The tears choked me. A man like that! A man like that! And to think that we could do nothing for him! I ran out of the cell. The major was waiting impatiently, pacing up and down the corridor. He must have been eavesdropping, but judging by his face he had understood nothing but those curses. I could hardly stand on my feet. Nothing mattered to me any more. The muscles were working in the major’s face and he was white with fury.

“‘Don’t cry, Fräulein, remember you are at work. As soon as he ceases to be of any use to us....’ he did not finish. I can’t remember how I got out of the prison.”

The girl heaved a sigh and was silent. Her nerves must have been in a bad state even now. She was shivering, her lower jaw trembled, and her face twitched nervously. For a long time she said nothing.

“It’s very hard for me to talk about it, but I want the whole country to know how Soviet

people behave out there. After all, you can only guess. I must tell the whole thing, it's my duty. Nobody but me knows anything about that man's last hours. . . .

"After that encounter in the prison I went about all day in a kind of stupor; I had to make a tremendous effort of will, I had to muster all my forces and training, everything that was best in me, so as not to let go before them, before those creatures, and still I could not, and when they spoke of him, I broke down and burst out crying. Fortunately the major had already told the chief about our visit to prison and they interpreted it in their own fashion and tried to console me. I listened and covered my face with my hands so as not to see them. I was so afraid that I might not be able to stand it and would do something silly.

"But the worst was to come. You probably know something about our work, don't you? And about me? I'm not a new hand at it. But still this was the most terrible ordeal I've ever gone through. The general I mentioned was a favourite of Göring's, and they all kowtowed to him. He decided to question the pilot himself. He was tall and handsome enough, a cocksure fellow with high colouring and bleached eyelashes that reminded me of a pig. He went

to the prison himself with my chief, the major, and me. As we all went in, he walked straight up to the pilot in his self-assured manner, introduced himself by name—which was, by the way, a fairly well-known one—and held out his hand. The pilot turned away and made no reply.

“‘You are behaving badly, young man; I am a general, a hero of two wars. The rules of honour require an army man to acknowledge the greeting of his senior.’

“‘I interpreted this. Very likely the general was a good actor. They’re all fairly good comedians, those in the fascist upper circles. And he spoke with such an appealing air of goodwill!

“‘What do you know about honour?’ the pilot said, with a little laugh.

“‘This, too, I translated. The general did not seem taken aback. He frowned, but only for a moment. Then he asked:

“‘Perhaps you have been badly treated here? What makes you so bitter? Are you dissatisfied with the medical treatment and care you have been given? Tell me, and I’ll immediately give orders that things be remedied. A hero remains a hero under any circumstances.’

“‘Ask him what he wants,’ the pilot said wearily.

“He was evidently in terrible agony from his wounds, but he did not want the enemy to notice his suffering, and only the perspiration that beaded his forehead and trickled down his face revealed what he was going through.

“The general’s patience was wearing thin.

“ ‘Tell him, damn it all, that he is being given a good choice. A little information about the air units—information that none of his countrymen will ever know he gave—and he is assured a quiet, easy life till the end of the war in one of the best European health resorts. Nice, Baden-Baden, Bad Wildungen, Karlsbad. . . . Point out to him that his obstinacy is not likely to become known either: the worms in the grave eat the corpses of heroes and cowards with equal appetite.’

“I translated the speech. The pilot burst out laughing.

“ ‘Tell the general he is evidently the worthy spawn of his Führer.’

“I could not think of the German word for spawn at the moment, and so translated it as disciple, and, to my surprise, the face of this dull, self-complacent creature lit up. He seemed to fill out with importance and replied that it was so, the lieutenant’s ob-

servation was quite correct, he really endeavoured to imitate his Führer. He was sure, he said, that now they would find a common language—two heroes, two soldiers. And he asked the Herr Leutnant, who had just shown him that he was far more sensible than many others of his countrymen, to tell him why these Soviet Russians were so helplessly stubborn, why, in retreating, they had burned their own homes; why, even on this side of the front, they did not want to submit and still persisted in struggling, letting themselves in for reprisals and punishment; why they preferred to die without revealing anything, though it was clear to any fool that they had lost the war? Why? This self-satisfied blockhead had taken the pilot's remark that he was a worthy disciple of Hitler as a sign that the Russian had paid him a compliment, and was willing to accept his proposition. The general reasoned at some length, obviously showing off before my chief and the major, whom he considered to have disgraced themselves. I translated the questions to the pilot.

“‘The fool!’ he said very distinctly. ‘Tell him it's because we are Soviet people—not their sort!’

“If you had only seen him at that moment!

He raised himself on his elbow, his eyebrows, very black against the white bandages, drew close together and his eyes flashed. The general flew into a rage. He sprang up with a filthy oath, quoted a German saying, roughly the equivalent of the Russian, 'No matter how well you feed a wolf, it will always look to the woods.' The lieutenant, he said, was just a dull-witted, stupid beast, who repaid the gentlemanly treatment and care he was receiving with blackest ingratitude.

" 'I thought it was the accepted thing, in accordance with the international agreement on the care of wounded,' the lieutenant replied.

" 'Agreement, indeed! Ha-ha, as if we would waste German bandages on Russian swine that we get nothing from but a stink!'

"The general shouted and stamped his foot. My chief, realizing that he was depriving them of the last chance of getting anything out of the prisoner, strove respectfully and persistently to restrain him. But this was of no avail! When I translated the general's words, the wounded pilot sat up with a jerk on the stretcher, knocked the plaster off his legs with his fists, and tore off the gauze bandages from his head and neck. The blood gushed out and streamed down his face.

"‘I don’t want any of your fascist mercy!’ he muttered.

"‘You filthy fanatics, barbarians, a country of northern Papuans!’ the general bel-
lowed.

"Then suddenly, it all happened in an instant, he started back, pressing his hand to his face: the lieutenant had spat blood into his eyes.

"All three Germans flung themselves on him, beating him and kicking him. The wounded man fought back. He was still strong, and rage gave him ten times more strength. Sitting on the stretcher, streaming with blood, he got a blow in wherever possible, and they could not get hold of him. I was standing close by. You understand, I had to look on while those beasts tore this fine, proud young man to pieces. With all my being I wanted to rush to his rescue, or if I couldn’t help, at least to die with him. I wasn’t afraid to die. But I had my duty to think of, and I knew that now, on the eve of our offensive, my work here was of special importance and that I had no right to give myself away. To have died defending him, would have meant treason to my country, a blow to the cause. No matter what happened, our people had to be kept informed, so

that you here in the army would know what the fascists were up to, what their plans were.

“On that day I did the only really brave thing I have ever done. I did not even cry out, but just sat there, clutching the chair arms so hard that my nails turned blue while I tried to fix every detail in my memory. They beat him to death before my very eyes. This wonderful man whose very name I did not know died fighting. The whole office was spattered with his blood. But in that hour I proved worthy of him; I did not give myself away. And no matter how hard things went with me afterwards, I carried on till the day and the hour when you took Kharkov.”

She was now shaking from head to foot, this slip of a girl with her delicate features, who in time of need had displayed the nerves of a seasoned fighter, the will of an old soldier.

“I never knew his name, and I don’t know it now, but I shall never forget him. I shall always see him as he was—so strong and brave and noble.”

And suddenly she covered her face with her hands and sobbed, quivering like a young birch tree in an autumn gust. Her high-piled hair shook down, the hairpins fell out on the

ground, the wavy chestnut locks streamed over the rough cloth of the army overcoat, and among the strands was one of grey.

Then all of a sudden she calmed down. Her face, wet with tears, grew firm, even hard. She wiped her eyes, gathered and pinned up her hair, and said with a laugh:

"All nerves . . . I'll just have to go for a rest, that's all, there's nothing to be done about it . . . I'm getting a furlough. . . ."

"And then what?"

"Then I'll go back there; the war isn't over yet."

Her gentle face grew grim and unapproachable, and suddenly she looked ten years older.

"Back there? After all you've gone through?"

"He said that day: 'We are Soviet people.' The whole man was revealed in those words. I shall bear them in mind all my life."



The Banner of the Regiment

HERE it is, that old, heavy silk banner, embroidered in gold, the sacred fighting emblem of the tank regiment, the banner for which a secret struggle was carried on for two years under the most unusual conditions. Many people participated in this struggle; much blood was shed and more than one person gave his life. But the main fighters were Ulyana Mikhailovna Belogrud, an old kolkhoz woman with a wise, tired, wrinkled face, and her daughter Mariika, a seventeen-year-old Ukrainian beauty who reminded one of the charming portraits painted by the young Taras Shevchenko, Ukrainian poet and artist.

The battle for the banner began in September 1941 on the vast steppes around Poltava, through which the slow Psel River winds and loops.

Having forced the Dnieper, the German armoured division of General Kleist was tearing towards Kharkov, and the remnants of the Soviet tank regiment, long since cut off from their own unit, were fighting in the valley of the Psel River, shooting from ambush along the roads, attacking columns of enemy automobiles, enemy headquarters, and small rear garrisons in the villages.

The tankists had long since used up their gasoline. They refilled their machines at deserted Machine-Tractor Stations, collected munitions from destroyed tanks standing in large numbers on recent battlefields, and continued to fight. The Germans, seriously alarmed, turned their marching units against these unusual partisans. The Soviet regiment melted away in these unequal battles. Finally, on September 25, in the battle near Orzhets, the last two machines were burned. Only eight men were left from the tank regiment: Senior Lieutenant Vasili Shamrikha, Political Instructor Stepan Shapovalenko, Lieutenant Leonid Yakuta, Sergeant Grigori Lysenko and Privates Nikita Yakovlev, Lev Nasonov, Nikolai Ozherelov and Alexander Savelyev. These were tankists without tanks, fighters deprived of their habitual weapons. But though they found themselves far behind

enemy lines, not one of them dreamed of laying down arms.

One night Lieutenant Shamrikha called a halt among the dry, rustling reeds in the Orzhets swamps. Out of his bosom he pulled the regimental banner, unwrapped it in the light of the moon, and pressing the slippery silk to his heart said solemnly:

“As long as we eight soldiers have our weapons and this banner, our regiment is not defeated. It exists. It is in action. Let us pledge on this banner, comrades, that we shall never shame it with cowardice or faint-heartedness; that we shall not lay down arms as long as we are alive; that as long as a heart beats in one of us, we shall guard this banner and fight fascism.”

The lieutenant was the first to go on his knees and say: “I swear!” And he kissed the corner of the banner. Each one of his comrades did likewise. Then Shamrikha sewed the banner inside the lining of his padded jacket and said: “Let us go.”

Thus the dismounted tankists launched upon partisan warfare. Perhaps one of those from this partisan group who remained alive has now in his leisure time calculated how many German machines were burnt that autumn, how many supply columns were

seized, how many Germans were killed in ambush, how much wheat prepared by the enemy Service Corps for shipment to the *Vaterland* was turned over to the population or set on fire. In those days, they had no time to keep accounts; they were constantly in action. They fought, and fought skilfully, cautiously, quickly, always hitting the mark, always appearing suddenly and disappearing just as suddenly, leaving no traces. And the highest tribute to their activities was to be found in the instructions circulated by the German *Feldkommandantur* in Poltava on "The struggle with Soviet air-borne troops wearing tankist helmets in the Velikiye Krynki, Kobelyaki and Reshetilovka districts, numbering up to a thousand men."

These instructions warned the Germans and their hirelings to be cautious in travelling through the steppes, prohibiting movement after dark and in columns of less than fifteen machines without escort; the night guard of the *Kommandantur* was enlarged and the garrisons were moved from village cottages to large buildings. Simultaneously notices appeared everywhere. The villagers were promised rich prizes and innumerable privileges if they would help find members of the Soviet band "in tankist helmets" and

bring at least one of these partisans, dead or alive, to the *Kommandantur*. SS units were summoned from near Tarnopol to come to the Psel. Mass raids, shadowings, and arrests began. Squadrons of mounted policemen roamed the steppes, searching the ravines and valleys, and setting fire to the dry underbrush.

But in spite of the fact that the steppes in these places were bare and smooth as a stone, and that when the snow had fallen a man could be spotted several kilometres away, the "air-borne troops in tankist helmets" were elusive. An announcement even appeared stating that they were brought in planes from unknown bases in the Soviet rear for each operation, after which they were taken back the same way.

Now that the war is over in the Ukrainian steppes, the secret of the partisan elusiveness can be disclosed. Shamrikha's tankists found staunch friends among the local population, and when the SS unit and field police surrounded the village, the partisans did not even think of running away or hiding, but remained where they were; one worked as a mechanic, another as a shoemaker, a third at some other civilian job. They waited until the raid was over and the district became normal.

Then they took their helmets and guns out of hiding, said goodbye to their many friends, and proceeded on their way. Across the steppes and through snowbound villages, from mouth to mouth passed the word of the arrival of Soviet units, of unexpected raids, fires, explosions, and the punishment of traitors. This news infused new life into the people and strengthened their belief in the hasty return of the Red Army. And it made the German rats shiver day and night behind locks and bars.

The tankists guarded the banner like the apple of their eye. It was as if it cemented this handful of courageous soldiers, linking them with their army, which was fighting hundreds of kilometres away. But they made one mistake. They told some of the villagers about this banner. In some unknown manner the news reached the Germans. In the *Kommandantur* they realized that the elusive "airborne troops in tankist helmets" had some connections with this banner. For a captured military banner, the Germans received an Iron Cross, First Class, a promotion in rank, and a month's furlough to their native land. This encouraged the Germans to begin a frenzied search.

After many raids, arrests, and interrogations, the German *Kommandant* in the

town of Reshetilovka got on the trail of the banner. At night storm troopers followed Vasili Shamrikha as he was returning from an operation in the steppes. They arrested him, along with Shapovalenko, Yakuta and Lysenko. They brought them to the village, undressed them and ripped and cut up all their clothes, but the banner was not found. Then they began to torture them. The *Kommandant* thought up the following method: the naked soldiers were tied to posts and cold water was poured over them.

It was January, and a sharp north wind was blowing in from the steppes. The ice in the well crackled with the cold.

"Where's the banner?" asked the SS men.

The tankists only swore fiercely.

Icy coats of mail gradually covered the blue, benumbed bodies. The SS men poured on more and more water. The tankists turned into live statues of ice.

"Tell us where the banner is and we'll warm you up—give you vodka baths!" said the *Kommandant* through the interpreter.

"Damn you to hell! May your Berlin burn up and your Hitler be blown to smithereens!" gasped Shamrikha through blackened lips.

He lived longer than the others, and the women said that from his armour of ice he threatened Hitler and all fascists with a still more horrible death.

Thus the four tankists froze to death admitting nothing. At that moment the banner was in the lining of private Ozherelov's jacket. He sat with Nasonov, Yakovlev and Savelyev in the hut of their peasant friend, Communist Pavel Trofimovich Belograd, in the village of Popivka, discussing how this sacred regimental emblem was to be guarded under these new circumstances, when they were continuously being hunted down, and each of them was threatened by arrest.

They decided that the tankists would continue their partisan operations in outlying districts of Poltava Region, leaving the banner with Pavel Trofimovich for the time being. In the evening Pavel Trofimovich gathered his family. He shut and locked the blinds and secured the door with hook, latch and bolt.

The kolkhoznik unfolded the banner and showed it to his family, saying in Ukrainian:

"See this? Do you realize what it is?"

Then he ordered his wife and daughter Mariika to carefully fold the banner and make a satin cover for it. He himself cut out a piece of plywood, stretched the banner on it, and

nailed it to the bottom of a wide oak bench standing in one corner of the cabin.

“If anything should happen to me, each of you who remains alive must guard it sacredly until our troops return to Popivka. And when they come, give this banner to the officer highest in rank....”

He also said that if any one of them should be tortured, he must let his tongue be cut out or his eyes pierced or his soul torn out, but not a word must he say about the banner.

Old Belograd was the first in his family to carry out his own instructions. Lieutenant Vasili Shamrikha and his comrades died in unspeakable torture without saying a word. The Germans, however, discovered that these dead partisans had sometimes visited Belograd and other peasants in Popivka. The gendarmes seized Pavel Trofimovich, his brother Andrei, and eleven other Popivka citizens, and took them to the Velikiye Krynki prison. While they were tying old Belograd's hands behind his back, he managed to whisper to Ulyana Mikhailovna:

“No matter what happens to me, don't say anything about.... Guard it like the apple of your eye!”

Just as terrible a fate awaited the peasants taken to the Velikiye Krynki prison as had be-

fallen their predecessors. Wanting to find out where the banner was hidden, the storm troopers surpassed themselves. They singed the bodies of the peasants with blow torches, pounded nails into their wrists and ankles, and finally cut off their noses and ears. Blind, covered with blood, barely alive, Belogrud flashed his already unseeing eyes when asked where the banner was and gasped:

"I don't know anything. . . . I don't know, god damn you!"

Thus died the Ukrainian peasants Pavel Belogrud, his brother Andrei, and their fellow-villagers, without disclosing the partisans' secret. The full weight of this secret fell on the shoulders of Belogrud's wife.

For some reason the Germans had a feeling that the banner was hidden in her home. Having been unsuccessful in their direct methods, they resorted to more subtle means of discovering the secret. Ulyana Mikhailovna was offered rich awards. Knowing that the SS had cleaned out her sheds and cellars after arresting her husband, the Germans promised her flour, grain, kerosene and meat if she would tell them where the banner left by the partisans was hidden. Like her husband she stubbornly answered that she knew nothing about any banner.

During the day, her children saw her only reserved, busy and proud, but at night, when everything was quiet, she would stealthily crawl down from the oven, go over to the bench, and grope with her fingers to make sure that the banner which had brought her family so much trouble and sorrow, was still there.

At about this time a new calamity befell the district. The Germans began shipping off the young people to Germany. According to the quota, each family with children must at first supply "one healthy unit—a girl or boy as seen fit." In connection with this mobilization, the *Kommandant* played on the tenderest spot in a woman's heart—mother love. The soldiers seized three of Ulyana Mikhailovna's children—her daughter Lyuba and sons Pyotr and Ivan, for shipment to Germany. They told the frightened mother who hurried to the Reshetilovka *Kommandantur*:

"Give up what the partisans left, and we'll return all your children and give you a document exempting them from further mobilization."

Without answering, she turned around and went home. All that night and the next day, and still another day and night Ulyana Mikhailovna and Mariika, who had managed to save

herself by hiding in a haystack, wept in each other's arms. It was hard for the mother to let Lyuba be shipped off to Germany and still harder to say farewell to her two sons who reminded her of the late Pavel Trofimovich. At moments she wavered. She would get up and with unsteady steps go to the bench, fall on her knees before it and feel beneath it with her hand: was it there or not? Convinced that it was there, she again sat down beside her daughter, hugging her and weeping. What should she do?...

In the morning the mobilized, having spent the night in the village hospital under guard, were driven out into the street. The carts were already creaking, and the crying of women and shouting of soldiers could be heard. The columns were to leave at any moment. A man from the *Kommandant* came to the Belogruds' and again asked Ulyana if she would surrender the banner. The woman got up, and leaned against the wall for support. She was pale, but the eyes she raised to the messenger burned with hatred.

"I have no banner," she said. "And I have never seen any partisans."

Then, weeping, she fell back on the bench, lacking the strength to go and see off her

children, who were leaving on so terrible a journey.

Thus the mother and daughter guarded the regimental banner for a year and seven months, confident that bad times would pass, that the words of the late Belograd would come true and the day would dawn when our troops would march along the green streets of Popivka. Then she would give them this banner, soaked in the pure blood of the fighters and martyrs, preserved by her through so much unhappiness, so many trials and tribulations.

And this day was drawing near. Endless German columns stretched to the Dnieper through Popivka along the highway. They were no longer those disciplined lines of frightening, noisy machines which had passed to the northeast two years before, filling the spacious steppes with a clanking and purring, and raising clouds of dust to the very skies. Where were all these terrible machines? What had happened to those huge guns, powerful tanks, and endless flatiron-shaped armoured cars? Where had the fascists lost all this steel which had made them feel invincible, the steel smelted for them in factories all over Europe?

Deprived of their machines, they were like snails dug out of their shells, no longer instilling fear in anyone. Tired, unshaven, in

tattered uniforms, in worn-out boots or barefooted, they pressed ahead, urging along tired mares and oxen. Dusty, battered machines rumbled by loaded with grain, furniture, feather mattresses and all kinds of junk. And although the soldiers billeted in the village pretended to be brave, and made tiresome assertions about re-grouping, Ulyana Mikhailovna understood: they were retreating. She seemed to immediately straighten up, grow younger and fresher from this knowledge alone. She would get up before daybreak, climb a high hill overlooking the Psel, and gaze hopefully to the east where the sun was rising over the willows reflected in the steel mirror of the imperturbable river.

Rumours came from the Poltava steppes that the fascists, sensing that their end was near, were especially vicious in pillaging and burning, slaughtering horses and stealing cattle. The glow of fires arose on the horizon at night and remained until morning.

And Ulyana Mikhailovna thought: what about the banner? It might be burned with the house.... To lose it now, after having suffered, endured, lived through so much!

She discussed the matter with her daughter and decided to keep the banner on her person. Taking it from the hiding place where

Pavel Trofimovich had put it, she ripped open the cover, wrapped the silk standard into clean unbleached linen, and wound this linen around her body. Thus she cherished the banner day and night, not leaving it for a minute, not sleeping, always on the alert, listening with beating heart to the deep cannonade which reached them on dewy mornings from over there across the Psel.

The front drew ever nearer. The Hitlerites garrisoned in Popivka suddenly jumped up at a night signal and began to burn houses, sheds and grain ricks. They began with the church at the far end of town, and Ulyana Mikhailovna and Mariika stood in the garden, choking from the smoke and fumes, guessing whether the Germans would have time to burn their house or not. Suddenly a motorcycle drove up to them. A translator jumped off the baggage carrier and an officer out of the sidecar. Ulyana recognized the Reshetilovka *Kommandant*. He was dirty, dusty, and his face was overgrown with red whiskers. But even in retreating he had not ceased to dream about an Iron Cross, a promotion, and a month's furlough at home, away from this terrible front where everything roared and crashed and was put to flight under pressure of the Soviet onslaught.

"The Oberleutnant asks you for the last time to give us the banner hidden by the partisans. Can't you see that everything is burning? We won't touch your house or your cow and we'll give you bread. Let us have it!"

"I don't know what you want," said the woman in a tired voice, looking mournfully at the soldiers who were now pouring kerosene on the sturdy cottage built by her late husband and meant to stand for a century. Already the tongues of flame were reaching up to the reed roof. With a roar they swallowed the ornate, blue window frames and shutters which her husband and sons had so lovingly carved the year before the war, a year which had been particularly prosperous for the kolkhoz.

And the woman fell on the warm, dry earth of her garden and shed bitter tears near the glowing ashes on the hill above the Psel, in the midst of the village now wrapped in flame and bitter smoke. Unmindful of her surroundings, she wailed until evening, and her neighbours and even her mother-in-law were unable to console her. She cried until she heard her daughter's voice:

"Mama! Mama! Our troops! Our troops.

have crossed the Psel, Mama!" said the happy, beaming Mariika, gently shaking her.

Only then did Ulyana Mikhailovna come to herself. Slowly she got up off the ground and felt for the banner wrapped around her body. A lump of happiness rose in her throat, making her catch her breath. She stood up, unwrapped the linen, and took out the flaming standard embroidered in gold and silk. Mother and daughter held it out, leaving the charred remains of their house and passing through the flaming village to the river. The first units of soldiers armed with tommy guns were coming down the hillside to the ford in their familiar uniforms, in dusty faded tunics, covered with sweat.

What else can be added to this story?

Nasonov, Ozherelov, Yakovlev and Savel'yev continued to carry on partisan warfare in the Poltava area, forming their own unit which broke through the front to the advancing troops. They contacted an important commander with whom they came to Popivka, took the banner from the Belogruds, and with the proper military honours returned it to the tank unit, in which the regiment was reborn.

And now before newly recruited tankists take their oath in this regiment, the officers tell them the history of this banner, pre-



served by the selfless heroism of Soviet people from enemy hands, a banner which the reborn regiment subsequently carried in battle across all of the Ukraine into Rumania, and then from Tarnopol across Poland and five German provinces to Berlin.

In revering this banner, the regiment pays honour to the memory of those who guarded it, as well as to those who bore it with honour along the war roads to the enemy capital.



The Night Before Christmas

(Told by a participant in the underground movement)

I USED to know the man before the war—I think I'd better change his name, it being such a crazy story—we'll call him Olexi Kushchevoi—well, so I used to know him before the war. That is, I knew him enough to say "hello" and "goodbye"—a nodding acquaintance. Saw him a couple of times in Krivoi Rog, at Stakhanovite meets. His name was in the papers all the time then, and naturally he was pointed out to me: there he is over there, the famous Kushchevoi, they'd say. Then once we travelled from Moscow together—after receiving awards at the Kremlin for high output. We happened to land in the same train and same

compartment going back. Travelled a whole day and night together and couldn't seem to get into conversation. He kept looking through the window all the time and whistling to himself. Only once when we were passing by some orchards—it was spring, you see, and the trees were in blossom, looked like snowdrifts on a green plain—he began to tell me that he wanted to grow some special sort of pears in his little garden down there in the mining region. But that topic petered out too. He turned away again and started whistling. I got tired to death sitting there with him so I went to join some fellows I knew in the next compartment. I like sociable people—I like a fellow that knows how to work hard, and is no fool when it comes to taking a drink, who can tell a story and listen to one and join in a song when the occasion arises. After all, what sort of a guy was he? Coming from Moscow after Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin himself pinned the Order of the Red Banner of Labour on his lapel, and can't even smile. Keeps talking about some fool pears.

Well, after that I didn't see him any more till that summer when our famous Krivoi Rog region was suddenly turned into a battleground. You remember how it happened? At first we expected the Germans would soon be

stopped and our army would march on Berlin. Later we miners went off to a place on the Bug to dig a line of defences—well, we put some hope in that too. Then suddenly—bang! We were told to evacuate our works. Then we realized things were in a bad way! Must we really abandon this place where we had taken such deep root? How could we? It was different with the factories—take apart the machines, load 'em onto a flatcar and send them off wherever you please, even to the Far East. But we couldn't take the mines apart, all underground the way they were. Only the pile driver and elevator were on the surface, and of what use were they to anyone? But as for the ore, you yourself know the kind of ore we have here! Wonderful ore! The Germans had had their eye on it for a long time. Kept trying to get concessions.

Well, to make a long story short we got instructions from the regional committee of the Party to blow up the mines. Blow them up! That's easily said. To a workingman it's the same as murdering his child with his own hand. Here you've reared it, fed it, cherished it, brought it up to be a joy to you—and now—do away with it. But there was no way out. Couldn't let the fascists

have our mines! So we blew them up. Wept bitter tears, and blew them up! If we hadn't, the fascists would have used this first-class ore of ours against us. Yes, dear comrade, that was a bitter pill for an old miner! Here your fathers and grandfathers worked, here you yourself, learned to do the job you loved, and won fame for your skill. But what could a body do? This was war—even bigger sacrifices were being made.

There, I've gotten off the track. Well, at the mine where our best ore was, and where Olexi Kushchevoi (as we've agreed to call him) worked, the fellows blundered a bit. That's putting it mildly. To tell the truth, they blundered badly. Us miners, we've known dynamiting ever since we were kids. How it happened there I don't know—either the charge was too small, or somebody got cold feet the last minute—anyway German tankists unexpectedly arrived at that mine—and the explosion only shattered the pile driver and put the elevator out of order. That was a surprise all right! The best mine in the region—in the hands of the Germans! Of course it wasn't running—the power station, pumps and blast engine had been dismounted and sent east, but the mine itself was intact!

At the same time there was another surprise. The Party secretary was hurrying through the town with the last group of men—the ones that had blown up the mine—with the Germans already at their heels. And there stood that same Kushchevoi in the yard of his cottage, digging in the garden just as if there was nothing amiss. He'd hung his jacket neatly on an apple tree, rolled up his sleeves and was pruning raspberry bushes or something, the devil only knows what. "Have you gone crazy?" they said to him. "The German tanks are over there, on the other side of the hill; all good people've left already!" And he answers: "Tanks! Tanks'll catch up with us out on the steppes too. What has to be, will be," he says. "Can't escape fate. I'm not going, boys, I'm staying behind." The others gaped at him: had the man lost his mind, or what? But he just turns away and goes on pruning his damned raspberries.

Well, there was no time to waste talking, the Germans were too close. The boys ran off to the river, then made their way through the willow thickets along the bank until they came out on the steppes beyond the town. On they went, and all of them felt as if someone had spat into their hearts. That man

stuck in their minds like a nail: was it possible that their fine flock of miners had its black sheep? And the main thing was that until the very last day they had all respected him—carried his portrait at demonstrations and held him up as an example to others. He'd even got a decoration, and what a decoration! Well, then they naturally recalled that he hadn't joined the Party. The Communists at the mine had hinted to him more than once—the pride of the mine, a famous person, wasn't it high time he joined? But he kept finding excuses: not ready yet, he'd say, he'd earn the honour some way and then apply for membership. Well, of course, everybody thought of that at once.

In short, when the underground organization sent me to that mine I was told: "Watch out for that Olexi Kushchevoi. That Olexi, we've been informed, is playing up to the Germans already."

Well, that was that. But listen—I came to that same mining town, not as a miner, of course, but as a cobbler. Was a time when my father supported the family working as a cobbler—during the old times when he was out of a job—and me too, when I was young, before I went to the mines—used to work at the trade a bit in Dniepropetrovsk.

Learned a thing or two. 'So everything was fine: I had a passport with a German seal in which I was registered as a resident of Dniepropetrovsk. I also had a paper from the *Kommandantur* there, and some tools, and a beard too. Not much of a beard it's true—a short gingery one that looked more like a bear's tail than anything else, but still it was a beard. I wasn't afraid of the Germans much—they're sort of stupid in that respect—with them the main thing is to have a paper, and if the paper says they can rely on a person, they let him alone. What I was afraid of was to come across people who knew me. A beard, of course, changes a person's looks, but still, I was pretty well known around Krivoi Rog. The newspapers had written about my output records, and printed my picture. In a word, the people knew me.

But everything went off all right. Gradually I settled down. Pasted a cobbler's sign on my window, charged low prices, and cobbled away. Well, I'm not boasting, but lots of people started coming in with orders. We'd talk, I'd learn this and that, how the land lay, studied the people and saw things weren't so bad—that is, not so bad for us, but pretty rotten for the Germans. All the other mines in the Krivoi Rog region were blown

up, so they concentrated all their attention on this one. They posted a huge sign: "Eastern Stock Company" and began to rehabilitate the mine—poured lots of money into it. But they weren't getting anywhere, not a step. They fixed up the power station and elevator quick. Brought different equipment from somewhere—stole it no doubt, installed it and set it going. But there was no ore, couldn't get any ore. Why not? You listen. Our regular miners, every last man of them, had all gone away. Evacuated to the Urals with their families. Others had joined the army. The only people who had stayed behind were old folks, people on pension and some who hadn't wanted to leave their land and homes. Well, the Germans went after them. At first a doctor, a decent sort you could see, gave everybody papers saying they were too sick to work. But the Germans caught on quick and they shot the poor guy. Forced all the old men to the mines under military escort. "What was your trade?" They asked them. And the old men all replied in one voice: "We had no trade, just labourers: unskilled labourers." They dawdled, didn't get any work done, but still they didn't refuse to work. That Herr Johann Ebert, the chief, had plenty of trouble with them. He tried everything: promises, and threats, brib-

ings and beatings, but still things stood still. He even shot several men, but that didn't help either. The old men held firm. "Death can't scare us," they said, "we've lived our lives."

By that time I'd found some good people and told a few of them who I was. Organized two little groups among those old men—for carrying on illegal work. Through them I contacted the whole mine without leaving my bench. And they reported to me that of all the local people, the only one collaborating with the Germans was Olexi. The first day the Germans came, they said, he dressed up and went to their headquarters—I'm citizen so-and-so, he told them, and I want to work loyally with the German administration. Naturally they were glad, welcomed him with open arms. At first they made him a brigade leader, then they put him in charge of all the work down in the mines. Well, thinks I to myself, you just wait, honeybunch! So this is how you repay Soviet power for all the honours it showered on you! My underground group leaders wanted to do away with Olexi. "All right," I said, "It's a holy deed. Kill a viper and forty sins will be forgiven, as the saying goes. Get rid of him, only do it on the quiet."

But they didn't bump him off; couldn't do it somehow. He was too careful. Never went

anywhere except to the mine and back. And that was always in the daytime. German officers were quartered in his house with a guard outside. Couldn't reach him any way at all. All right, thinks I to myself, we'll wait a bit; no matter how long it takes, you'll die a dog's death in the end. And about that time work picked up with the Germans. And this is why. In desperation they brought war prisoners to our mine. This is how they made them work: they'd bring a man to such a state in the death camp, that he could hardly drag his legs, then they'd say to him, "If you want to work—we'll feed you." Naturally some of them agreed. After all, who wants to climb into his own grave! And some thought: maybe I'll get a chance to run away or something. There were some decent chaps among them and I contacted them at once. Brave fellows they were—if we'd had the dynamite they'd have blown up the mine in a minute. I organized them into three underground groups, five men to a barrack. There I sat, off to one side, hammering nails into shoes while my helpers carried on out there in the mine, and in the war prisoners' barracks, and in the settlement. Reports came in to me all the time—here a machine had caught fire, there a storehouse had burned down, or a train had

gone off the rails. And not a hint as to who was responsible.

Having had such an easy time of it in Europe, the Germans figured that any land they occupied belonged to them. Brought a bunch of soldiers, set up gallows on the square, organized *Kommandanturs* and *Subkommandanturs* and thought they were the power—that whoever held the reins was the boss. But they found out that that law didn't operate here. In the daytime the power was in their hands, during the night, in ours. They proposed, but we disposed; they armed themselves to the teeth, but trembled like rabbits, and after dark they were afraid to stick their noses out of the houses. That's the way it was. . . .

There, I've gone off again. Looks as if I'm getting talkative in my old age. To get back to the story, I quickly came to terms with the war prisoners. At the first opportunity we would blow up the mine. Only what could we use? We didn't have any explosives. My only connections with the underground regional committee were by radio. They promised to get explosives to us as soon as there was a chance, but how long could we wait for that chance! And here things were almost finished—before long the mine would

be in working order. I instructed my groups to look around for some old blasting cartridges in the shifts but no go: under observation every minute! One German to five Russians, every move watched. . . . Bad business. And I was madder than ever at that damned Olexi, doing his best for the Germans. "You Judas, you!" thinks I. "If only I could get my hands on you, I'd teach you something all right!"

As for him, they reported he'd become even more cautious, was trying to become friendly with some of the war prisoners, got some of them released, took their side with the Germans, they said he even carried some of his rations to wives of Red Army men who were having a specially hard time. "No sir!" thinks I to myself. "Can't fool me! There's no turning back for you." And then my boys were smart enough to set his house on fire and it burned to the ground. Everything belonging to the officers quartered in it was destroyed. But he himself, you see, was at the mine that night—came home only next morning. And the boys told me he wasn't so upset about the house as about those fancy pears he grew. After that incident his wife and child disappeared altogether, devil knows where he hid them, and he himself went to

live at the mine office. Now try and get at him, with all those guards!

“Well,” thinks I, “you’ve dug in all right, but there’s no escaping the people; once they’re after you, they’ll get you no matter where you are!” Meanwhile winter had come, the second winter under the Germans. One day at the beginning of December an old man brought me an old boot: his son had sent it to be repaired and had wrapped it up in a newspaper. The Germans published a newspaper here in Dniepropetrovsk, in Ukrainian. And the newspaper wasn’t torn. All the articles were about our region: how the German command was rehabilitating enterprises demolished by the Bolsheviks. Hey, what was this? I forgot all about the boot, so interested was I in the newspaper. “The Jewel of Krivoi Rog Restored!” This article announced the fact that our mine was ready for exploitation; that at Christmas it would produce the first truckloads of the famous Krivoi Rog ore for the German Reich. The old man asked—he was our liaison man without suspecting it—“What about the boot, cobbler, will you fix it?” And I thinks to myself: the devil take your boot, old fly poison. But I said, “It’ll be ready by evening. Tell your son to come for it himself, and bring

his neighbours too. Get me?" His son was a group leader, and the neighbours, in our code, meant the other group leaders. The old man shuffled off and I sat there with the boot giving myself hell. "Some underground worker you are! So this is what you've let things come to!" And to add to it my radio operator—a brave girl who kept us in touch with our side—received an order from headquarters that I should do everything possible to prevent the Germans from setting the mine in operation.

How could I prevent it? I spoke to my group leaders about it that evening—we sat there and bawled songs for appearance's sake, with a bottle of homebrew on the table for decoration. "What'll we do?" I said. And they scratched their heads and suggested this and that, but we couldn't figure a way out. The Germans weren't such fools as not to guess why their machines suddenly went up in smoke. They'd posted sentries all over the place, brought dogs to the shafts and had searchlights scanning the grounds at night so that not even a cat could slip by. What should we do?

"Things are bad, boys," I said. "Very bad," the group leaders replied. "Couldn't be worse."

We agreed, however, to go the limit. If we couldn't blow up the mine yet—didn't have the means—we'd at least queer their celebration. One of our old men, a blaster, had learned to make grenades out of tin cans. We'd supply our men with those grenades and on the opening day we'd give all the guests a treat!

I was so mad I decided to disobey all instructions and take the risk together with the boys that day. That wasn't right, of course, but after all, I'm only human—I've got some self-esteem too. Well, we began to prepare. I picked good men—hard as flint: two of them were war prisoners, one was a former engineer from Tula and the other, a Ukrainian like me, had been a combine driver in the Dnieper district. Staunch fellows, with good heads on their shoulders. And one of our old miners volunteered; he'd been a good hewer but he worked as an unskilled labourer for the Germans. I was the fourth. A pass had already been obtained for me as a local artisan, representative of private initiative, so to speak.

The Christmas holiday was just around the corner. And that newspaper of theirs rattled on, as if to taunt us: "The Opening of the Mine," "Industrial Rehabilitation," "Eminent Guests Expected from Berlin."

"Very well," thinks I to myself, "we'll brew some good beer for your guests!"

Preparations were in full swing in the mine too. They'd brought a bunch of their what d'ye call 'em—*Feldpolizei*—posted tanks at all corners of the mining grounds, and set up searchlights. They'd decorated the pile-driver with coloured paper like a Christmas tree, and on the top they stuck that plucked eagle of theirs, with a swastika in its claws. The old man told me all this and observed that probably they were expecting somebody very important.

And that's how it turned out. On the day before the celebration a special train arrived right at the mine. Armoured platforms in front and in back, and in the middle all de luxe cars. The fat, red-haired director of the "Eastern Company" had come from Krivoi Rog, Doctor Schramm—Doctor Sram* we all called him. Here was a fiendish Hitlerite for you, walked around with a steel rod in his hand; if anything displeased him, didn't matter who was on the spot, a worker, an engineer, he'd give him a crack. But it turned out he was the least important of the ar-

* A play on words, sram meaning shame in Russian.—*Tr.*

rivals, because when all their big shots started getting out of the other cars he simply crawled, all bent over and simpering like a ninny. Then there were all kinds of newspaper photographers and movie operators. Kept getting in the way all the time. Well, and we were there too, the four of us, in the crowd, pretending to be curious. We stood there, and the photographers kept aiming their cameras at us and gesturing at us to smile. We'd planned to fling our cans at the arrivals as soon as they got out of the train, but those photographers were in the way, a wall of them between us and the train, so we had to wait.

Just then I had a feeling that someone was looking at me. I turned round: yes, my old acquaintance Olexi Kushchevoi was staring at me. "Can he have recognized me in spite of my beard, the rat?" thinks I to myself. I was in the midst of the crowd, and if I tried to slip out I'd fall right into the clutches of the police. . . . So I stood there. And he stood. I took a look. He was watching me from afar, his brows knitted and sort of smiling, and it seemed to me he nodded. But to whom, I didn't know. To someone in the crowd probably, but I had a feeling it was to me. "Well, you wait, my Judas," thinks I. "You can thank God we're out for big game today

—a pity to waste a charge on you, or I'd blow you to pieces this minute." He shook his head and followed the big shots into the office where, as we knew, they were holding a big feed.

I heaved a sigh of relief: he hadn't recognized me. But whom had he nodded to? Maybe he did recognize me and nodded, to say, "I didn't give you up; put in a good word for me too when the time comes." And when I saw him follow that fascist scum into the office, I burned up inside. "Don't you worry," thinks I, "I won't forget you!" However, there was no time to think of that. The crowd was notified that the mine would be opened in the evening, there would be fireworks, and the biggest shot of all—a minister or something—would raise the first truck of ore to the surface with his own hand, and then the Germans would distribute Christmas presents to the workers who had done the job. "Suits me," thinks I. "That'll be just the time for us to deliver our present!"

So we waited for evening. You know what kind of weather we have round Krivoi Rog at that time of the year—fog, and then all of a sudden a heavy frost turns everything to ice. Slippery as a skating rink. Fierce

weather, though it's pretty to look at—everything glazed, with each blade of grass an icicle, and the trees like glass, their branches bowed to the ground and tinkling in the wind. But you wouldn't want your worst enemy to go out in weather like that. I fell at least five times before I got to the mine that evening—hurt my side and almost broke my leg—but I got there just the same. I showed my pass and passport with the commandant's seal. Everything was all right so they let me by. "Well," thinks I, "I may get away from here, and I may not, but at least you sons of bitches will have a celebration!" I looked around and saw my men in the crowd, stamping their feet and beating their hands to keep warm. We'd agreed beforehand not to approach each other and not to talk. They were to watch me and do what I did.

The grounds were brightly lighted. Searchlights beamed. Light as day. Everything sparkled and glittered, as if the world had dolled up specially for the holiday. From the building where the Berlin visitors and the German chiefs were celebrating came the sound of voices and laughter. It was evident they were getting a jag on. All the better for us!

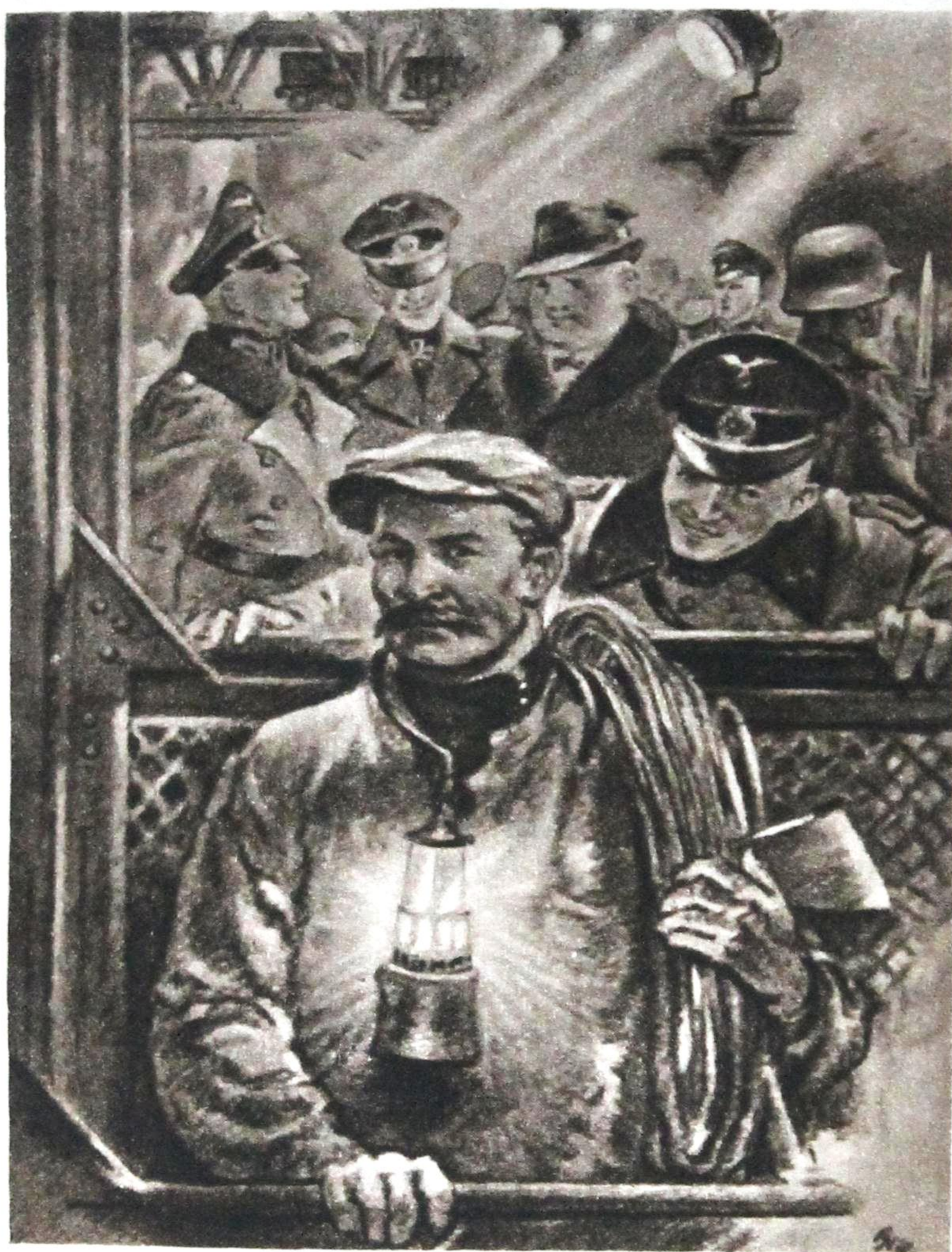
Well, we stood there blowing at our fingers and waiting. And suddenly the door

opened and out came that Olexi Kushchevoi along with the German mine chief Johann Ebert and Dr. Schramm. The Germans were tipsy. They kept gesticulating, smiling and shouting at the tops of their voices. And they kept telling Kushchevoi to go somewhere or other. The mine chief ordered him in Russian to go down underground, get everything ready, and give the signal. Kushchevoi went away and the Germans returned to the office. And we looked at each other as if to say, "See how thick he is with the Germans? They trust him like one of their own." And I felt vexed again. Presently we would strike at the Germans and again he would escape punishment. I was so annoyed I clean forgot that maybe this was my last hour on earth.

However, everything turned out different than we expected. This is what happened, just listen. We were waiting for the Berlin guests to appear when suddenly we heard the beating of a drum and saw their soldiers marching, yes sir! And not the ragged, older men who hung around the mine, but husky fellows, all picked—fat faces, uniforms neat, probably came on that train too. The escort. They marched up to the office building, lined up, slipped their tommy guns off and began

to push back the crowd. Maybe the Germans sensed something wrong, maybe they were just scared, in any case they pushed us about a hundred steps from the doors, cordoned us off, and wouldn't let us come any nearer. My God! That was the end of our plan. You couldn't throw a can that far. And again I was mad—no doubt that Kushchevoi had whispered to someone to be careful. There I stood, swearing at myself for having spared the photographers and not striking in the morning. They'll get the mine running, thinks I, and what a disgrace for me! Some underground worker!

And then, as if for spite, their big shots appeared in the doorway, fat, fleshy, all wearing what looked like very high-ranking uniforms. They walked about near the pile driver, just as if they were taunting us; cameras clicked, movie operators cranked away and they preened themselves: see how important we are! This was just the moment to throw a nice bomb at them. But it was too far! Oh, what I went through that night! And my boys were upset too. Throwing caution to the winds, they came up to me: "Well, when?" they said. "Why don't you do something?" I could understand them. To have gone through so much for nothing! I tried to



calm them down by telling them the Germans wouldn't get away from us. They'd pass by us on their way to the train....

Just then the biggest shot, the minister, in a long greatcoat with a beaver collar and a high cap, fat and important, went up to the control panel and took hold of the switch. In a minute the cage loaded with our Krivoi Rog ore would come up to the surface. But now you listen: no sooner did he take hold of the switch than there was a roar. What an explosion! The ground shook under our feet, toppling us over in the snow like ninepins. What's that? I thought. A bomb? But no bomb could shake the earth like that. An earthquake? There'd never been one in these parts. Then some more explosions—bang, bang! The lights went out. Something fell. People screamed.... I jumped up and in the moonlight I saw the pile driver all bent over—a wonder it remained standing at all. The office building was split in two. I took a look: The German soldiers hadn't lost their heads. They jumped up off the ground and began to push back the crowd with their tommy guns. "*Zurück, zurück!*" Their chiefs picked up their coats and scuttled like hares across the grounds straight for the train, with the photographers and operators hoofing

it after them! By this time smoke was pouring from the pile driver—yellow, acrid smoke with a very familiar smell....

Well, the next day the workers were informed that as a result of geological displacement, the shaft had sunk and work been stopped. Geological displacement your grandmother! My miner's nose had sniffed that smoke! It smelled of real dynamite.

And so I was back again at my cobbler's bench with somebody's dilapidated boot between my knees, my mouth full of nails and a hammer in my hand. I broke my head recalling things and putting two and two together. And do you know what I concluded? It must have been him, Olexi Kushchevoi, who had blown up the mine. No one else could have done it. The Germans had scoured every corner before Christmas and none of our people except him could have been underground that night. And it all came back to me, how he stuck up for the prisoners, how he let workers off their job, how his wife took food to Red Army men's wives. The more I thought, the more I remembered. I asked my old men, the underground group leaders, what they thought. They too scratched their heads and said no one else could have blown up the mine.... That meant the

man hadn't stayed with the Germans for nothing; he had borne the entire disgrace in silence, and lost his home, and suffered insult from us, all in order not to let our ore get into German hands. However, I couldn't understand why he hadn't opened up to us, for it was clear he knew about us.... Well, that was his own business, once he'd decided to perform a feat like that alone!

I realized all this, and such a bitter feeling came to me, more bitter than gall. But what was the use of crying over spilt milk? That very night I radioed the whole story about the night before Christmas to headquarters, admitting my mistake and reporting the heroic death of miner Olexi Kushchevoi. Then other matters came up, and since the Germans abandoned trying to make that mine work, the underground regional committee sent me off to another job at a slate mine the Germans were operating.

Well, I returned here some time later when the Red Army had driven away the Germans. Some of our miners came with me and people started drifting in from the countryside—some had evaded work by going there and pretending to be peasants—our miners came back from the Urals and we began to work. We launched the German power

station, which hadn't been damaged much by the explosion—repaired the elevator, straightened the pile driver which had been knocked crooked and fastened it down. Then we began to tunnel the bedrock.

When the first urgent work was done and there was time to look about a bit, an idea came to me, comrades—I'd been elected to the Party bureau by then. The idea was that we must put up a monument to the miner Olexi Kushchevoi who died the death of a hero down in the mine. We took it up at the Party bureau. Everybody was for it. The district committee supported us, said it was a good idea. First of all, because it would rehabilitate the man in the eyes of the settlement, since he'd been unjustly accused of collaborating with the Germans. And then there was the religious side: when the explosion took place, all the old women in the settlement had said it was the hand of God—that God didn't want our ore to fall into fascist hands; and since it was the hand of God, the old women started going to church, and the young ones followed them. "Well," thinks I to myself, "why should the deeds of our heroes be attributed to the hand of God? Let God help the old women himself, if he can!"

Well, we found a stonecutter in Krivoi Rog, offered him a good sum of money and said to him: "Cut a granite obelisk for our hero." "All right," says he, "I'll do the best I can." And we shook hands on it.

And believe it or not, the very day we ordered the monument, when we returned from Krivoi Rog, I was sitting in my room when one of our Communists, a miner, came in. He sat down on the bed, grabbed his sides and laughed till he almost rolled over.

"There's another miracle taken place at our mines," he said.

"What do you mean, a miracle?"

"This is what I mean," he said, "the whole settlement is saying that Kushchevoi's ghost came back from the other world, walked about the ashes of his house, fondled his pear trees, swore at somebody, and went away."

"Quit your fooling," I said, "I've had enough mystics."

The words were no sooner out of my mouth than the door flew open. You could've knocked me over with a feather. There stood Kushchevoi himself. It was him all right, no doubt about it, only he had long red moustaches, and was all in rags and tatters with his Order shining bright against his rags.

Well, I saw there was no mystics about this—the vision was real enough.

“Hello!” says I. “Sit down and tell us how things are in the other world.”

“I don’t know how they are in the other world,” he says, “but they’re pretty rotten in this world. Why did you have to go and burn down my house and ruin half of my pear trees?” he says. “Where am I going to live now? Instead of ordering me a monument you’d better give me a place to live in. I’m not alone,” he says. “There’s the wife and the daughter.”

I was glad.

“So you’re still alive?” I asked.

“Still alive,” he answered.

“Where the devil were you?” I said. “What’ve you been doing all this time? And be so kind as to tell us how you got out of that explosion—the whole tunnel caved in....”

Well, we lighted up and he told us all about it. It seems that back there when the Germans were just entering the town he already had everything packed to leave, and then came the news that the mine hadn’t blown up—was remaining intact for the Germans to get. Then he had the idea of staying behind, to get the Germans’ confidence and wait for his chance. It was too late for him

to inform the district committee about his plan, and when the secretary of the Party bureau passed him on his way out, he was afraid to tell him—there were too many people with him. So he decided to stay behind at his own risk. He collected the dynamite bit by bit over a period of several months and hid it underground. And when he'd gained the Germans' complete confidence he set to work. He laid three charges of dynamite right under the base, fixed the fuse, and at the very moment they telephoned him, he lighted it.

"How did you get out alive?" I asked.

"Very simply," he said. "The fuses were timed. I lighted them and headed in the opposite direction, into the mine, ran to the ventilation pipe and climbed out. Then I went south to join my family...."

He certainly had planned his job well. I envied him to think how he had fooled the Germans that Christmas eve! Couldn't have been better!

"How come you weren't afraid to fool the Germans?" I said.

"It was easy to fool them. They're miles away from the people," he said. "It's you I was afraid of. I knew you were after me. Some day you'd get me, I thought, and I

wouldn't be able to finish the job. I guessed you were scratching about somewhere here but I was afraid to open up to you. I saw you were doing good work," he said, "you made the Germans shiver in their boots. Still, I thought, suppose you fail. Then the Germans would get our ore. So I decided to work parallel. That would be safer—if you didn't get them, I would."

Well, we had a talk, drank a glass of our best homebrew to celebrate, and then he said:

"Listen, friend, give me a blank—I want to apply for Party membership now that I've done my bit. I had my application ready long before the war, but I kept thinking the honour was too high, it ought to be earned properly."

That's Olexi Kushchevoi for you, a very recent member of our Party!



Front Line on the Eisenstrasse

TOWARDS the end of April 1945 the commander of the mechanized corps storming Berlin from the southwest (at that time the capital was already surrounded and half occupied by our troops), sent his car to pick me up at army headquarters. The driver found me in the operations section and reported that "the chief" had given an order to have me conveyed to the corps' left flank "outfit," that being the group which had advanced closest to the centre of the capital. There was something about this small, nimble fellow with his angular face set off by prominent cheekbones and quick inquisitive eyes which made the whole staff, in defiance of military custom and his corporal's shoulder-straps, call him simply Misha. Misha called for me in a huge eight-cylinder touring

car painted a poisonous yellow—obviously a trophy machine. His attitude toward this luxurious car was one of marked disdain, and he thought longingly of its predecessor, a shabby little M-1, affectionately called Emmie. After Emmie was bombed during the crossing of the Neisse, he mourned her loss as one might mourn that of a close friend fallen in battle.

“There was a car for you, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel!” Misha would sigh. “Remember how I used to drive you through the mud near Korsun-Shevchenkivsky? She took those frontline roads for three years like a darling! And this piece of trash,” he kicked the tire of the touring car with his boot, “won’t even guzzle ordinary gasoline. High octaned is all she’ll take. Like to see what she’d do on those Korsun roads!... Oh, Emmie, Emmie! I wasn’t fated to drive you into Berlin!”

Checking his outburst, Misha stood to attention, saluted, and asked permission to give a lift to some fellows from “their outfit” who had come to army headquarters to be decorated. Permission granted, he darted behind a building and returned almost immediately with two of the men. Their numerous Orders and medals (polished to dazzling

brightness with tooth powder), their Guardsmen's badges and the red and yellow wound stripes adorning tunics to which the smell of the ordnance stores still clung; their whole bearing, which revealed a free and unstudied alertness, betrayed the fact that these were veteran soldiers.

One of them, a tall, fair-haired, handsome fellow, gave a brisk salute and introduced himself by saying in an unhurried bass voice, with the rolling intonation peculiar to all native-born Byelorussians.

"Sergeant Trifon Lukyanovich."

"Corporal Nikolai Tikhomolov," announced the second, with a clicking of heels and a stressing of "o's" which immediately betrayed his Volga origin.

Feeling that a nap would not be amiss after several sleepless nights, I made myself as comfortable as I could on the wide leather cushions of the back seat. Corporal Tikhomolov got in with me, the sergeant seated himself in front with the driver, and the powerful car, swiftly picking up speed, shot north with a gentle motion.

Through the rows of blossoming pear trees that lined the highway gleamed an unvaried stretch of the smooth, clipped landscapes so typical of Germany. Even lavish

spring could not change their resemblance to pictures by a diligent, but untalented artist. The dragging monotony of the landscape, the strained swish of the tires, and the soft sway of the car, all tended to put me to sleep. As soon as I closed my eyes the waves of air streaming over the windshield brought an odour of warm, wakening earth that stirred visions of other, more distant scenes, of the vivid, vigorous spring in native fields and forests, of golden dandelions strewn through young grass, of the unkempt curls of birchwoods and the forked tips of blue fir forests, slowly awakening from their long winter's nap; of the old amber of pine trunks, oozing sap on the carpet of young needles, of the boundless stretches of green winter fields, and the rich loam of kolkhoz ploughlands.

As I drowsed I heard Misha engage in casual conversation with the Volga-born corporal. They discussed the war news, sighed over their families back home, criticized the Germans for futilely clinging to the stones of a destroyed Berlin, railed at the Allies for dragging out their offensive, marvelled at the profusion of red feather beds in German homes, mentioned the rocket planes which the German Command had lately begun to use, and came to the conclusion that now nothing could help

Hitler, that there wasn't any sense "in acting the mule," that it was "a hands-up affair and the sooner over the better."

"Wish I could get home in time for the hay-harvesting," the Volga man burst out thickly, with a stress on the "o." "The meadows of our kolkhoz—why, they stretch as far as the eye can see, Misha. The grass reaches up to your waist and it's as crisp and sappy as a cucumber. Sharpen your scythe well and in the morning it splices through the dew with a swish-swish-swish. If we finish with Berlin according to schedule do you think they'll demobilize us in time for the hay mowing, sergeant?"

"I'm in no hurry," Lukyanovich drawled, who had not been participating in the conversation.

"What did you get those Orders for, Sergeant?" asked Misha, who could not stomach taciturnity in fellow-travellers.

"Nothing much," replied the sergeant with obvious reluctance.

"Call that nothing! Don't try to tell me they'd give you the Order of the Red Banner for nothing. And it wasn't handed to you in the unit, either, but up at headquarters. Come on, let's hear about it!"

"Is the lieutenant colonel asleep, do you think?" asked the cautious Volga man and, leaning over to the front seat, he said in a whisper, "honest, friend, he and I feel we don't deserve this last decoration. Look at this Red Star. Know what I got that for? For Stalingrad. You know what that means. This Glory here they gave me for the Dnieper. I crossed the Dnieper holding on to an empty barrel, the kind you keep sauerkraut in—was one of the first to cross, too, and the river under fire all the time! Then, again, this Glory of the Second Degree is a souvenir of the Sandomir bridgehead on the Vistula. We held that bit of land for forty-eight hours. So tiny you could spit across it in any direction. They kept threshing us like wheat on a barn floor, but we held on till our main force, as they call it, caught up with us. Did I deserve a ribbon for that? I sure did. I even think our brigade commander was a little too close-fisted that time. He isn't any too generous where decorations are concerned. But this is a Red Banner, no less! And for what? For a fascist general, devil take him!"

"A general? Whew! How did that happen?"

The tone of the question was such that I knew Misha had bounced off his seat in excitement. The conversation was taking an inter-

esting turn, and sleep left me. By an effort of will I suppressed a desire to take a look at the speaker.

“Here’s how. . . . The sergeant and me, we took one of their generals prisoner, and he wasn’t just an ordinary general, but a big guy—a lieutenant general. . . . Don’t step on the gas, makes me feel sick. If we bang into someone they’ll be taking Berlin without us. . . . As for the general, make your sides split, just listen. You heard about the way our brigade pushed through to the Neisse, didn’t you? Well, we grabbed a bridgehead across the river, dug in, and—ran out of shells! The infantry hadn’t reached us yet. Smashed German units were knocking about in the forests behind us. A regular layer cake if there ever was one. The munitions officer, he calls the sergeant and me and says to us, ‘Take a motorcycle, and go back to the second echelon—I don’t care how you do it, but we gotta have those shells by evening.’

“Well, all we said was yes, we’d do it. We jumped on that motorcycle and off we went in a cloud of dust. Had to go through a forest. The sergeant was driving, and I was in the sidecar with the machine gun watching the road on both sides. All of a sudden we thought we saw something big moving along—

side the road like a bear shying back into the bushes. We put the brakes on, I swung the machine gun up at the bushes, and the sergeant felt for his tommy gun. 'Who's there? *Hände hoch!* Come on out or we'll shoot!' And all at once it was a *Guten Morgen* to you and we saw three Fritzes crawling out to us from the bushes, two of them officers and one a civilian, grey-haired and stubble bearded, his clothes all in rags. Well, we searched them and took away their pistols. We didn't know what to do with them. They'd sort of dropped out of a clear sky, and us with a military assignment that was a must. There was no one about in that whole forest. All right. So the sergeant says to me, 'It'd be a damn sight better not to take them prisoners, but it's what we're supposed to do, seeing as they threw down their arms themselves. Orders is orders.' So he says to me, 'You, Tikhomolov, better take 'em to the nearest unit while I go on with the assignment. We could do it the other way round,' he says, 'but you know those rats wouldn't be safe in my hands.' That's how it was, wasn't it, Sergeant?"

The latter made no answer. He sat there silent, unconcerned, intent on some thought of his own which could hardly have been cheerful.

"No sooner said than done. He drove away and I took the road back, driving the Germans ahead. And as we went along I says to myself—the devils must've been trying to break through our lines. Officers they are. What happens if they run away from me now? Try and catch them in this forest! And I'll be the one to answer for them. I did some fast thinking and this is what I decided. I took their belts off, and I cut the buttons off their pants and, begging your pardon, off their underwear, too. It was sure reckoning.... Their hands were kept busy and they couldn't run for the life of them—not in that state; they'd get tangled up the first step they took. Well, just as I'd begun on the buttons, the old man in the civilian's outfit became angry-like and started to jabber something, and the officers were kind of flustered too. They kept pointing at him and saying 'General, General.' Well, I answered back politely as anything and in my best German, 'Nicht, he ist civil, no marks of rank, so it's bitte-dritte, you better hold those pants up, and kommen Sie, gentlemen, straight ahead....'

"And with no adventures of any sort on the way I brought them to where our brigade was stationed. After I'd handed them

over to the commandant and said *auf wiedersehen* I forgot all about them, so many of them prowling about in the forests these days! By evening the sergeant here came back with the shells. All was well and we had carried out our orders. Then suddenly a dispatch rider from the corps arrives with a summons for us from the general himself.

“‘Thank you for your service to your country,’ says he to us. ‘Do you know who it was you captured?’ ‘No, we don’t, Comrade General.’ ‘I’ll tell you, then. A very high ranking officer.’ That was all. What with all the prowling he did in the forests, that fascist commander must’ve grown pretty wild. No better than a clothes brush his mug looked, and the dirt! And the way he kept shoving his hand inside his shirt and scratching! Well, he had it coming to him, the old devil. And for a scarecrow like that they gave us an Order! And what an Order!”

“They gave you what you deserved, that’s all,” said Misha with an eye to policy, noticing that I was awake.

As he drove he threw sidelong glances at the man who sat beside him, but the latter kept gazing impassively ahead. It was evident that Misha itched to make his uncommunicative companion loosen his tongue.

"Where do you come from, Comrade Sergeant?"

"Used to be from Minsk."

"What do you mean, 'used to'? Where does your family live now? Have you got a family? Married, aren't you?"

"I was married."

"Oh, yes..." Misha dragged out hesitatingly. "Any children?"

"I had children, too."

The sergeant turned away, indicating that he had no inclination to talk. But it was not so easy to dispense with Misha. After a short silence he broached the subject again from another angle.

"Are you a city man or a kolkhoznik?"

"A city man."

"Where were you born?"

"In Repichi. There used to be a village of that name near Minsk. You wouldn't know anything about it, anyway, so why ask?"

"Are your parents living?"

"I haven't anyone. No relatives, no address other than a field number. Understand?"

"I understand," sighed Misha, "gloomy guy, you are. The road seems longer with a man like you in the car."

"Best to take me the way I am," the ser-

geant replied without trying to hide his irritation, "and if I'm too much for you, then stop at the traffic control post and I'll hitchhike the rest of the way."

"What for? You don't have to talk if you don't want to," and Misha began to whistle a tune from one of the latest films.

The highway broke off at a blown up viaduct, and the road detoured, circling a field and coming out into a long and cheerless line of blocked-up cars. Misha attempted to drive around them, but the watchful traffic patrol girl stopped him with a resolute wave of her red flag.

Neither Misha's assertions that Berlin could not be taken without us, nor the compliments he paid her rosy cheeks could melt her into compliance. She let the cars through in one line only, from each side of the road successively.

"All right then, we might as well get a little sun tan," Misha declared, and was the first to step out onto the flat, trampled grass.

The taciturn sergeant straightened out his tunic in a businesslike way and set off to help break up the traffic jam. As soon as he had moved away the Volga man turned to Misha.

“Why did you have to go pestering him like that? Why pull at the man’s heartstrings? It’s true. He’s all alone. His whole family was wiped out by the Germans. Just think what that means....”

And the sociable corporal told us of the tragedy in the life of the friend with whom he had fought side by side ever since Stalingrad. After having been seriously wounded during a crossing of the Pruth, the sergeant was classed unfit for duty and sent home. He found his way to Minsk where before the war he had been a mechanic at a radio plant. The plant was no longer there. In place of the house where his wife and three children had lived he found a huge crater overgrown with nettle and burdock. The neighbours told him that a German bomb had wiped out his family at a moment when they were about to be evacuated. Without a word the soldier turned away and sauntered off. Never once looking back, he walked out on the Vitebsk highway and a passing car took him to a fork in the road, from which he could get a good view of the surrounding country. The car drove away and he stood there in dazed stupefaction, helplessly searching for the gay little village which had once been visible from the milestone beside

which he was standing. The stone still lay there, the meadows were as green as ever and the river wound among them like a silver ribbon. But no village was in sight. Low mounds covered with weeds were all that was left of the houses. Charred stumps took the places of the curly willows which had once thrown cool shadows beneath the windows.

From the bank of the river, thin streams of smoke curled up into the sky. The soldier made his way to them along a footpath overgrown with weeds. From a tattered old man who crept out of a mud hut burrowed into the bank he learned that the village had been burned down two years before by a German punitive expedition, as revenge for partisan support. All of the inhabitants who had been found in the village, among them his parents and younger sister, had been shot. Again the soldier said not a word. Scooping up a handful of ashes from this scorched earth, he wrapped it in his handkerchief and staggered off. He reached the station, joined his unit (which had been sent to the rear to be reorganized), and prevailed on the brigade commander to disregard his discharge ticket and accept him back again into his company.

"He was all right in battle; it was as if that inner wound had healed, too. Only whenever the mail carrier arrived, he would try to get away from the rest of the men. What a fighting spirit he showed! When anything that meant danger was up, Sergeant Lukyanovich was always the first on the spot. But now that the war's coming to an end he's become thoughtful-like," concluded the Volga corporal and, turning to Misha, added, "so you see, friend, you'd better not reopen old wounds."

In the meanwhile our turn to move had come, and we slipped back into our magnificent touring car, a frivolous blotch of bright yellow in the long, prosaic queue of frontline cars, all covered by a coating of dust as thick as fur. As we entered upon the highroad the sergeant silently climbed in with us.

On nearing Berlin the roadway traffic thickened and was soon condensed into several compact columns, all moving at different speeds in one direction. Hoping to push ahead, Misha swerved off the highway into a bystreet in search of a less busy thoroughfare. But all the roads were blocked. Time and again our car outdistanced tanks, artillery, self-propelled guns, trucks carrying gay, sunburned infantrymen, anti-aircraft units

with their great canvas-covered searchlights and sound-locators looking like monstrous flowers, dust-coated files of motorcyclists, and cavalry, strangely out of place in this flood of steel and roaring motors, and then tanks again, and great guns hauled by powerful tractors.

It was only when we were almost at Berlin where our troops halted to assemble and be regrouped that our car broke through the haze of dust. After crossing the concrete viaduct over the Berliner Ring we found ourselves at the edge of the city. Mansions rose from behind green walls of trees and cast iron gratings. In the yards stood automobiles, self-propelled artillery, and tanks. The motors of field radio sets crackled busily, and field kitchens poured forth streams of smoke. Red Cross flags hung from the walls of the most luxurious villas. Liaison men were laying wires and winding them round cast iron tram poles. From somewhere close by came the soft strains of an accordion, so unexpected and comforting in this gloomy, alien city. An army post-girl with her cap cocked jauntily over her curls and a full mailbag on her hip came walking along the streets of this prosperous suburb with the look of one who was mistress of all she

beheld. Its prosperity probably explained why this section had not been bombed off the earth by allied planes. With every crossroad the scene became more gloomy. All sign of verdure disappeared. Black heaps of ruins, some of them already overgrown with grass, others still smoking, came into sight. Ambulances were assembled at the entrance to the underground railway. From the mouth of the tube came two Soviet nurses carrying a stretcher on which a soldier in enemy uniform was lying, his eyes tightly closed in pain. The girls tried to move carefully and to keep in step. The sergeant looked at them hostilely.

"It's as though they were carrying milk, afraid to spill it. If I had my way I'd fling a grenade or two down there—good riddance to bad rubbish."

"We have our orders, Sergeant. A wounded man's a wounded man," Misha said with a wave of his hand to the prettier nurse. "Hi, there, snub nose, how many others down there?"

"No end to them. The whole subway's full of wounded," Corporal Tikhomolov answered for her. "They loaded them inside and left them there with no food or medical aid. Just forgot about them. Some of them have

been dead for a long time and are still lying there. But that's nothing! In one place the Nazis let the river into the underground. Wanted to drown their wounded so they wouldn't fall into our hands. They have our sappers to thank for blowing up the tunnel in time and preventing the water from flooding the place.... A bunch of cannibals!"

"And we're making a fuss over them! Maybe that one, the one whose wound our girl is dressing—maybe he finished off our wounded with his own hand," the sergeant said.

"Maybe, my friend, but then, he's a Nazi, don't forget.... And you? Do you know who you are? What about that Party card you carry in the side pocket of your tunic, eh?" The corporal threw a fond look at his friend and, without waiting for an answer, added triumphantly, "There, you see!"

At the front it's always preferable to be with people you know, so I decided to go along to the battalion where these, my fellow travellers, served, without stopping at the headquarters of the corps and the brigade. We drove carefully among formless heaps of bricks which made it difficult to divine the

former contours of even the streets. A sentry emerged from a gateway and barred our way. No cars allowed. Pedestrians only. Here began our fortified lines.

"Is our outfit where it was last night?" the sergeant asked after he and the sentry had exchanged the password.

"Yes. No moving forward for the present. Trying to make a firm stand. There's been a lot of firing going on. The battalion commander was wounded last night."

"Come on," commanded the sergeant.

We said goodbye to Misha, who backed away in his yellow touring car. Groping our way from one heap of ruins to another, we moved amid fantastic pyramids of broken stone. It was hard to realize that this could once have been a city street. It bore a much closer resemblance to a quarry. The only indications that people had once lived here were such chance reminders as a blue sign inscribed "Eisenstrasse," a sparkling stove of green tile which remained stuck to a piece of wall at the approximate level of the third floor, a rusty sewing machine over which the three of us stumbled in turn, and a strange abundance of metal beds poking through the litter. The sound of shell bursts was deafening in these mountains of ruins, and we

could hear machine-gun rounds and the hammering of tommy guns making a noise like a miner's pick.

The next thing we saw was a small queue of people in civilian clothes standing by a wall which through some miracle had remained standing. Old men in old-fashioned frock coats and creased hats, thin, haggard women with compressed lips and grey, dirt-stained faces were huddled there holding lunch pails and soup bowls wrapped in napkins.

The sergeant halted before this queue and looked at them with a heavy stare which made them shrink closer to the wall. Then he turned away with an abrupt movement and plunged into a dark, narrow passageway among the stones. Making believe that he did not hear me ask who those people were, he kept walking ahead, lighting the way with his flashlight. We were passing through a basement where steam and sewer pipes lay twisted like snakes. From behind me came the voice of Corporal Tikhomolov whispering, "our cook has been handing out leftovers to the German civilians. He's lured them to his crumbs like sparrows, so now they keep coming back for their *essen*. There are many

of them living like moles under the ruins. Some have their children with them. Well, here we are."

The command post of the battalion was crammed into a small room which must have served as dwelling place for a furnaceman. The captain, a man so young that his small moustache had the look of having been glued to his upper lip, rose from a luxurious upholstered chair and sadly informed us that the commanding officer had been wounded the night before and that he, the chief-of-staff, had taken over. No sooner had we begun to speak of war matters, however, than the captain brightened up. It was true that their battalion had pushed closer than any other to the centre of Berlin, but at a crossing of the Eisenstrasse it had run into an ambush of SS men. For three days now they had been unable to advance. They were not given any artillery support—the artillery was being concentrated for a gigantic attack somewhere to the south. He had been ordered simply to hold on and to beat off any enemy attempts to break through the ring of our troops. Just imagine—having to remain idle at a time like this! And though the captain's chest was bright with decorations and wound stripes, there was a suspicion of tears in his voice.

But suddenly a reckless light flashed in his grey eyes. He had no intention of sitting there with folded hands the way his neighbour on the right was doing! No, damn it all, he was going to attack without the artillery! He would wait until dusk, and then he'd show those rotten SS men! Already he had concentrated all his machine guns and trench mortars on both flanks and had everything ready for attack....

"Want to take a look at the Berlin front line? You don't need any field glasses to do that. This house is ours, the one next to it is no man's land, and the one after that, about thirty metres from here, is held by the Germans."

We stepped out of the room. The basement walls were vibrating from the violence of the cannonades coming from near and far. The forward post, brightly lit by the sun, lay at the further end of the basement. We could see the close-lying machine-gun nests, neatly mounted in brick, and the gunners sprawled behind stones. The basement ceiling had caved in, and it was as if the men were in a wide brick trench. In the right-hand corner soldiers were gathered. They seemed to be listening to something, their faces frozen in expressions of alarm.

My travelling companions in their full dress uniforms and dazzling regalia stood out among the rest.

"What's the meeting about?" the captain asked, trying to impart a commander's sternness to his youthful voice.

"There's a child in there," someone explained with a vague wave of his hand to where the wall of fortifications ended.

"Permit me to explain," said Corporal Tikhomolov, stepping forward and standing erect. "Here's what happened. An enemy shell must have landed in the basement. There was a woman in there who let out a terrific scream—wounded or killed most likely. She immediately became quiet, but her baby—hear it?"

Through the din and thunder of battle came the long-drawn sound of a child's cry. It seemed to rise from somewhere deep in the earth. Amid the black and smoking ruins quivering from shell bursts and gunfire, that thin, sweet, choking cry was a sound so horrifying that it sent shivers down your spine.

"Hm, of all things..." the captain replied, nonplussed. He who a minute ago had spoken of attacking a group of fortified SS men as of something quite commonplace and simple, was now in a state of agitation.

"It's been wounded, I think. Hear that cry? Got to save it."

"It'll be a hard job, Comrade Captain," Tikhomolov said. "They're covering every stone you see there. The boys tried putting a cap on a rifle butt and edging it out the window. The cap was rent in two places and the butt smashed to smithereens."

The cry came from the very centre of no man's land—a child's helpless, heart-rending cry. No cannonade could drown out this doleful sound.

At moments when it died down the soldiers looked at each other hopelessly. As soon as it commenced anew everyone sighed with relief.

"Well, here goes!" said Corporal Tikhomolov, and pushing down his cap, moved toward the parapet.

"Stop! You've got three kids of your own!" Sergeant Lukyanovich called out.

Lukyanovich suddenly made a dash for the wall. Lightly he leaped over the parapet and vanished from sight. Tikhomolov lunged after him and then stood still with the look of one who had received a blow on the head. On the German side there was a sudden, startled burst of rifle fire and the hurried patter of a machine gun.

"They're firing at him, the curs," breathed the captain turning pale. "Messenger, go tell the gunners to open fire on all embrasures! . . . The dirty scum!"

The captain tore off his cap and with a guarded movement, peered from behind a rock.

"He's that skilled at crawling, I can't even see him. . . . Oho, good boy, he's almost there. . . . Messenger, tell the gunners to open hurricane fire!"

The whole entrenchment now pulsed feverishly with machine-gun fire. Bullets whined and ricocheted among the ruins with a shrill, screeching sound.

"He's done it!" cried a nurse who had come running at the sound of the firing.

The sergeant had reached the centre of the ruins. We surmised that he had succeeded in scrambling down into a hole hidden from our view. Everyone gave a sigh of relief. Machine-gun fire from both sides ceased. A terrible quiet broken only by the sounds of a distant cannonade descended on everything about us, and in the silence everyone distinctly heard the wailing of the child gradually subside into a quiet sobbing, while the deep tones of a man's voice spoke words of solace.

"They're alive," Tikhomolov said, breath-

ing hard like a man who had done some heavy running. "He'll hold out until dark, and then we'll get him out of it."

The whole battalion was crowding at the basement exit. Those who had been having a nap came running in haste, buttoning their tunics on the way and trying out the locks of their automatic rifles. As soon as they learned what was up, they too craned their necks to catch the low sounds coming from no man's land. Everyone was silent; the medical staff girl was the only one who whispered in a kind of trance, "If he'd only come through safe...."

Suddenly there was another burst of machine-gun fire from the German side.

"Boys, he's crawled out of there!" the observer cried from somewhere on top.

"He's carrying a little child, a girl.... Hey, lie down, lie down, old man!"

"Not so easy for him to crawl! They can see him."

"It'd be different if he was alone. But the child...."

"Messenger, order the gunners to open fire on all embrasures, as hot as they can make it—hurricane fire!"

But even before the command was given everything began to throb and vibrate again

from the violence of the machine-gun fire. The air above the ruin was ripped, cleaved, and stitched through by bullet tracks. It seemed incredible that anything living could survive in this shrieking atmosphere. But the sergeant was alive. He crept very slowly, and the observers reported:

“He’s taken cover behind a boulder.... Moving again, impatient to get here.”

With the experienced eye of an old soldier the sergeant must have figured out in advance that under cover of the low, sloping brick pile which rose above the rest of the ruins, somewhere quite close to the ground, there must necessarily be a dead zone inaccessible to enemy fire. He found it, but had to move along the very ground, working with his elbows and twisting like a snake. And he was not alone. A live burden kept him from flattening himself out. He crawled on his side, holding the child in the crook of his left arm. His progress was very slow. The bullets, as they hit the brick and the plaster, hewed tiny red and white clouds in the air over his very head.

Everyone was watching him with such strained attention that through the noise of gunfire each man could hear the beating of his own heart. Now he had reached the para-

pet, and the men were about to grasp him and his burden, when something happened. The sergeant stopped as if he had run against an invisible barrier, and the next minute he lay limp on the ground.

"They've killed him!" the nurse screamed and, dashing to the wall, she clumsily began to scale it, scraping at the stones with her fingernails.

"Don't let them see you!" bellowed the captain. "Messenger, order gunners to increase fire on embrasures! Company commanders, get ready for attack!"

A tall body unexpectedly loomed above the parapet, and the next moment the sergeant had slid heavily down into the basement. He stood there for a minute swaying on his feet, his breath coming in short, rattling gasps. He was pale, and something gurgled and bubbled in his throat; he looked as if he wanted to speak, but could not articulate the words. In his arms he held a skinny little girl of two, her pale blue eyes wide with terror, her head pressed close to the Orders and medals on his chest. A dark stain slowly spread over the sergeant's new tunic.

"I'm wounded . . . take the kid . . ." he finally brought out with effort, and when

dozens of hands were stretched out for the child, he sank quietly to the ground.

The machine-gun action which now had reached maximum intensity, merged into one dense roar. A hoarse voice sounded from afar:

“First Company, charge!”

And somewhere quite close a young voice rang out:

“First platoon, after me!”

The soldiers were already climbing over the parapet, dipping down to the ground, running and crawling over the ruins. Some had squatted behind rocks, but a few agile figures in grey had already reached the wall of the opposite house and glued themselves to its surface close to the German embrasures. Bursting grenades rent the air. The acrid smell of burning powder nipped the throat.

“Let me go, let me go.... I’ll show them,” the wounded man gasped, trying to wrench himself free from the nurse’s grasp and scraping the concrete floor with his boots in a vain attempt to stand up on his limp legs. “Let me go, I tell you, let me go....”

His sinewy, sunburned hand was fumbling for the tommy gun on the floor. And next to him, just behind the nurse, a tiny fair-haired little girl, her face swollen with

tears, was sucking a large, dirty piece of sugar that someone had hurriedly thrust into her hand. With round, wondering eyes she stared at the tall man in the strange uniform covered with pretty, bright medals, who had carried her here, had suddenly forgotten how to walk, and was now, as helplessly as a very little child, struggling to free himself from the hands of a roundfaced lady in a funny white dress with a strange red cross on it.



Mama Klava

A BRIGHT ray of sunlight woke me up. It entered through the little window set in the wall level with the Russian stove on which we were sleeping, pierced the dusk beneath the white-washed ceiling of the clean little cottage like a golden sword, and came to rest right on my face.

As frequently happens with the soldier in wartime, when I woke up I did not immediately realize where I was and how I had got there. Then I remembered yesterday's unlucky flight through the sticky March fog, the white puffs of smoke from the ack-ack guns bursting overhead like overripe cotton bolls, the gashed wing of the plane, the pilot's lips bitten so they bled, and his narrowed eyes, glassy from tension, in the crooked little mirror, the heavy crash onto the snow-

covered field and the agonizing thought: where were we, on whose side had we fallen? Then suddenly—men in dirty, soiled, but dearly familiar army sheepskins running through the deep, wet snow toward the wreckage of our plane. Our boys! And immediately my body went limp with weakness.

We had landed, if this unhappy fall may be called a landing, within the lines of an advancing regiment of self-propelled artillery which was making a short halt in the woods. With the hospitality characteristic of Guardsmen, the artillerymen shared their food with the guests who had tumbled down upon them out of the sky. They bandaged the pilot's broken head as well as they could, and took us to some forest cottage where they turned us over to the care of its mistress, a tall, elderly woman of ample proportions and stately bearing. Then they bid us farewell, promising to radio our whereabouts to headquarters. They had done all they could for us, for at nightfall the self-propelled regiment was to go into action along the line of the breakthrough.

The pilot and I refused supper. We could hardly wait till the woman finished spreading some fragrant summer hay on the

Russian stove for us, when we fell asleep at once.

That was last night. Now the house shook from the nearby shelling; the windows rattled, the painted clay jugs and bowls danced on the shelves, the tin lamp suspended from the ceiling swung to and fro like a pendulum. And when bomb explosions rent the air the hall door creaked softly as it swayed open and shut, and smoke and flames jetted into the room from the burning stove.

Odours suggesting peacetime came from the fresh bread, and from the bunches of mint hanging in the corner behind the icons. And, as if defying the noise of the nearby battle, came the sound of laughter from below us on the floor: the noisy, breathless laughter of a child and the soft, caressing laughter of a woman.

The pilot, who must have been awake for some time, had pushed the cotton curtains aside and was quietly looking down. Without making any noise I edged over to him, and a pleasing picture met my eyes.

Sitting with her back to us on the sun-drenched earthen floor, which looked as if it were covered with golden straw, was a strongly-built, but youthfully slim and supple woman. She was playing with a sturdy two-

year-old boy who had a round face and black eyes. She had hidden her face on his tummy, covering the boy with a mop of long fluffy hair, and was pretending to frighten him, saying in a fearful voice, while choking with happy laughter: "Ooo, I'm going to eat you up!"

The little boy kicked and squealed, defending himself with his tiny hands, so chubby that his wrists were no more than a crease in the skin. He kept crying out: "Don't, Mama Klava, oh-h-h, don't!" The woman let him go; he scrambled to his feet and attacked her, pushing his little hands against her chest and trying to throw her down onto the floor. She pretended to fall and they played like kittens, both of them convulsed with laughter.

Resting his bandaged head on his fists, the flier was quietly watching them play, and his stern, rough, weather-beaten face wore an unwonted expression of gentleness, and showed that he was deeply moved.

"What a young mother!"

"Have you seen her face?" he asked.

The woman must have heard us whispering, for she turned her head. I almost cried out in amazement. She looked no more than seventeen, but her face was of a strange,

dead-white hue. It was as though the head of a marble statue, with the thick arches of the eyebrows and the dark dots of the eyes drawn on it in charcoal, had been attached to the body of this tall young girl. The lips were so pale that they could be distinguished only by their curve. The most surprising thing about this strange, marblelike face was that it bore no trace of illness. It was full, very animated, with a round, girlish chin and cheeks.

When she saw that she was being watched she jumped up, straightened her skirt, picked up the child and, treading lightly and noiselessly in her bare feet, carried him off behind the stove.

"How naughty of us, son.... To laugh like that. We've gone and woke up the men," we heard her say in Ukrainian.

"What men, Mama Klava? What men?" the child wanted to know. "German men?"

"No, no! What an idea, son! Our own men, ours.... They're fighting over there.... They're tired.... We'll feed them right away, you and I...."

And while we dressed on the stove behind the curtain this woman, whom the child for some reason invariably called "Mama Klava,"

moved about gracefully and noiselessly as she covered the table with a clean cloth and set it with steaming boiled potatoes, a small jug of melted bacon fat, a large pitcher of milk, a glazed and painted bowl of pickled tomatoes which made the cottage smell of dill and currant leaves, and another bowl of knobby pickled cucumbers.

The mistress of the house, the tall, well-built, elderly Ukrainian woman we had seen yesterday, came in and began sedulously wiping her enormous wet boots on the doormat.

"Are they up?" she asked.

"They're getting dressed," the young woman replied.

"Soldiers riding by in a truck said Zvenigorodka's been taken. They said our men are heading for Khristinovka.... Thank God, at last...."

And with a sweeping gesture she crossed herself before the icons in the corner.

When the young woman brought us some water for washing out in the hall I could not help looking at her strange, handsome face. Her paleness and some elusive quality made me think of the sprouts that potatoes stored in a cellar far away from the sunlight grow in spring.

Both women were very hospitable. They did not treat us as strangers, nor as honoured guests, but rather as close, long expected kin back in the paternal home after many years of absence.

"Go ahead and eat—have some more.... Didn't you work up an appetite travelling here all the way from the Volga? Eat some more, you've still got just as far to go: Berlin is still a long way off," said the older woman, while the younger kept moving the country fare closer to us and heaping our bowls generously with a big spoon.

"Only we haven't any forks: the Germans stole everything. Thieves!" she said, looking away all the time.

Among the black-framed photographs hanging in rows on the wall between the two windows, side by side with naive Ukrainian landscapes painted on glass, evidently by some rural artist, was a photograph of a sturdy, stocky Red Army man with a broad, well-developed chest, wearing an old style uniform.

"Is that your husband?" enquired the flier, a seasoned soldier who felt at home wherever he stopped and who was able, despite his rough, sullen looks to make friends with people in a surprisingly short time.

"No, it's my brother," said the girl, gently rocking the little boy who had fallen asleep in her lap.

"And where is your husband? Fighting? Or taken prisoner?"

"I have no husband," she replied, and suddenly a slight flush broke out in spots on her bloodless face.

I felt we had touched on a family secret which had best be let alone, but before I could step on the flier's toe he was already pointing to the sleeping child and saying:

"Then whose boy is that?"

Beads of sweat broke out on the girl's forehead and her eyes grew misty with tears so that the long eyelashes stuck together. Snatching the child up she ran off into the adjoining windowless room and we heard her bar the door.

An oppressive silence set in, broken only by the crackling of the straw still burning in the stove and the rubbing of the dish towel on the cups which the older woman was wiping with uncommon energy, or so it seemed to us.

Frowning and wheezing, the pilot silently finished his cup of tea.

"I didn't mean to offend her! A chance

hit, a stray bullet, so to speak," he muttered gloomily. Then he called out to the other room: "What are you angry about? Well, excuse me, if I offended you, I didn't mean to. How can a man understand you women? How am I to know your sore spot?"

"She's not offended. . . . It's just that you upset her, Comrade Commander," the older woman explained.

"There, you see! I upset her. . . . I asked about the boy, a fine boy he is, why should any one be upset about a son like that?"

"That's not it. Yurik isn't her son. She is still a maid. . . . Understand?" said the older woman, whose height, proud carriage, oval-shaped face and sweeping, pitch-black eyebrows indicated that she was the young woman's mother.

She sat down at the table, poured herself some of the strong fragrant lime-leaf brew which we were drinking instead of tea, added beet juice, used in place of sugar in these beet-growing parts and, gravely sipping from her saucer, told us the story of this stately Ukrainian girl with the pale face.

This little forest cottage, immaculately whitewashed and decorated with blue and yellow designs, belonged to the local forester

Yukhim Zhizhlenko. He lived in it with his wife, Anna, and their children, Klavdia and Andrei. Klava had been born and raised in this forest. From childhood she had lived in its solitude and had learned to fear neither man nor beast. She went hunting with her father, and not only for rabbits and foxes. When she grew old enough the forester took her hunting for big game, for wolves and bears, certain that the girl would never funk or miss a shot at a critical moment.

When the war broke out Andrei was serving in the army, and the forester, even though he was past the military age, joined the army as a volunteer. Klava was going on fifteen then. Her mother figured that since they lived in the forest far from any roads, the war might, with God's help, pass them by. Besides, it was a pity to abandon the garden and stock; the forester's little farm was well run.

So they remained behind, "under the Germans," as Anna Ivanovna put it. They buried their most valued possessions and hid the cattle in the woods. At first the Germans really did not bother them. But later they began to drive the young people off to Germany. All the villagers were given quotas

to fill. And it happened that Klava's age group was called up. When her weeping mother told her of it the girl knit her black brows and declared: "I'll hang myself before I'll go work for the fascists. I'm a member of the Komsomol. I'd rather die."

Anna Ivanovna realized that her daughter meant what she said. Klava's father had known what he was about when he took her bear hunting. The mother slaughtered a 200-pound hog which they kept in a dirt pen in the woods, loaded it onto a sled, and dragged it off to the German-installed elder. "Here," she said. "Only don't touch my daughter." The elder promised to help. And indeed, until the end of 1942 they let Klava alone. Klava spent her days and nights in the forest trapping animals (for the Germans had taken away all firearms) and keeping a lookout for partisans with the idea of joining them.

However, although the roar of explosions was regularly heard at the Zvenigorodka and Khristinovka railway junctions, and more and more partisan exploits were talked about, the partisans did their work so secretly that the girl, whom few people knew, did not succeed in contacting them.

Then in the winter the Germans launched

a new slave labour recruiting campaign. This time the Germans did not bother about official notices and labour exchanges, did not try to make the deportation look voluntary. Special SS *Sonderkommandos* would drive into a village in trucks, blockade it, and begin to round up the young folk. Large groups of young captives would be driven to Khristinovka under strong guard, and Klava, hiding somewhere in the snow-covered bushes near the road, would weep silently on seeing the sad slowly-moving transport of boys and girls with knapsacks slung over their shoulders. They caught and arrested the young school-teacher who was hiding in a house in the new settlement. One night they searched the resin-lapper's cottage, located in the forest not far away, and took away his children. Klava felt like a wolf at bay. The circle was steadily closing in.

Anna Ivanovna presented the elder with another hog. He accepted the bribe willingly but said that he no longer had any power in this matter: the Germans were rampant. For all he knew they might come and take him away too. They were taking all the young people indiscriminately, combing them out, everyone, the lame and the crooked as well as the whole, as for Klava, she was the beauty

of the whole region; he would answer with his head for a girl like her. Nevertheless, the elder advised Anna Ivanovna to go and see the regional Gebietskommissar in Zvenigorodka. The fascists, he intimated, were an avaricious people: if you greased their palms they'd sell you Hitler himself with all his trimmings. Maybe the Gebietskommissar would be tempted by some gift and cross Klava off the lists.

So Anna Ivanovna dug up her husband's two best suits from the pit where they were hidden, and about a dozen dressed foxskins, and set out for Zvenigorodka. The elder had made no mistake. Despite his stern appearance, the Gebietskommissar proved willing to come to terms. True, he did not help, but he explained how he himself could be duped. Let Fräulein Klava give official notice that she was married and had a child, and then, he said, according to all the laws and instructions, he could cross her off the lists—as being a married frau.

Anna Ivanovna walked home, her head busy with thoughts: how despicable the fascists were—grease their palms and they were ready to have the wool pulled over their own eyes. She thought and schemed: there would be no difficulty about the child. There was

already a child in the house—they had just taken in a six-months-old baby, the infant son of the Communist schoolteacher whom the Germans had shot. But a husband—where would they find a husband in such a hurry, and a good one at that? And would Klava be willing to marry without love? Anna Ivanovna knew her daughter well—she took after her father. If she stalled, a team of oxen couldn't budge her.

On the way home she dropped in to see her husband's friend, the resin-tapper, an old widower whose own son and two daughters had only recently been driven off to German territory. She told him her troubles: "What shall I do? Where can I find a husband for her?" The resin-tapper laughed: "How about me, what's wrong with me?" Anna Ivanovna was horrified. "Whatever are you saying? Have you no fear of God? You're over sixty and she is sixteen! Or have you forgotten that you are a Communist?" But he just kept on laughing: "Oh, this is rich! This is wonderful! To fool your enemies is a pious deed," meaning, it wouldn't soil even a Communist. "We'll get the Germans to register us and then we'll have a holy family: Joseph, the Virgin Mary and the orphaned infant. I don't want anything from her, except perhaps to

launder my shirts. I'm all alone now and sick and tired of such woman's work. And later when our own people come back we'll have a good laugh and forget it. After all, the girl must be saved."

Klava did not object. She only laughed. She was delighted at the idea of duping the Germans. They registered their marriage, and straight from the *Kommandantur* each went to his own cottage. Only on the way, as they had agreed, Klava picked up a bundle of laundry at the resin-tapper's. Thus they lived; only rarely did the resin-tapper visit "his wife" at the forester's cottage, bringing along a bundle of laundry and a present for their little "son." He would sit a while, smoke some moss which served as tobacco, tell them the latest news about the Soviet Army's successes—no one knew how it got to his forest abode—and go away.

But the girl grew very fond of her so-called son. She spent days on end at his cradle, fed him milk from a bottle, rocked him to sleep, washed and sewed for him. And when one day the child stretched out his little hands to her and, looking at her with his innocent eyes, suddenly said "Mama," the girl was greatly agitated and overcome with joy.

Klava's love for her foster child worried Anna Ivanovna. She would lie awake nights and think: the Germans will be driven out, the war will end, her husband and son will return—how would she explain to them about the little boy? Yes, and the people might talk: some might know and remember the story, but others would forget. Sooner or later the girl will want to get married. So Anna Ivanovna began to break the child of the habit of calling her daughter "Mama" and to teach him to call her Klava instead. But the boy was stubborn—must have taken after his foster mother. He refused to give up the tenderest word contained in his small vocabulary. Finally, as a result of his foster grandmother's efforts, he began to call the girl "Mama Klava."

It was near the end of winter when one night the bluish rays of headlights suddenly shone into the windows of the forester's cottage. The brakes of a car screeched under the window and the hollow thuds of a rifle butt sounded against the door. Anna Ivanovna knew at once that this meant trouble. Klava was sleeping on the stove with the little boy and her mother had hardly managed to throw something over her when the SS men broke into the house. Klava screamed, raged,

fought them off with her fists, kicked the soldiers, scratched their faces. Finally they knocked the girl out with the blow of a rifle butt and without even allowing Anna Ivanovna to put a coat on her, they threw her unconscious into the truck. Her mother could gain no intelligence of her, either from the elder or at the *Kommandantur*. Only the all-knowing resin-tapper told her that that night a group of captives had been driven to Khristinovka. Perhaps Klava was among them.

For over a month Anna Ivanovna wept day and night. Her only consolation was the child in the crib. The snow had melted from the fields, the stork had returned to the roof and begun to repair its nest in an old wheel; the trees had begun to swell with sap and the last drop of melting snow had fallen heavily on the ground beneath the window when one night Anna Ivanovna heard someone, obviously a person familiar with the place, shuffling outside the door and feeling the wall, apparently searching for the hidden latch. Then the bolt slipped. The woman found some matches, struck one and cried out in amazement. A girl was standing on the threshold, tall and well-built like her daughter, but ragged, thin, with skin as yellow as

an old woman's. Anna Ivanovna gazed at the stranger in wonder until the match burned down to her fingers. Out of the darkness came Klava's voice: "Mama."

Yes, it was Klava. Somewhere near Brest the guards had forgotten to lock the doors of the box car. The girls slid the door open and, gritting their teeth to keep from screaming from fright or pain, jumped out of the speeding train and rolled down the railway embankment. The fierce February blizzard raging over the forests covered their escape and erased their tracks. Klava had only scratched her face and hands on the frozen snow crust. The two girls who had jumped with her got off with nothing more than bruises. The girls smeared their faces with mud, wrapped their heads in shawls like old women and, following the byroads, avoiding large settlements and highways, trudged past Kovel, Shepetovka, Berdichev, Uman until they finally reached their homes without mishap.

Klava washed up, changed her clothes, picked up the child, who recognized her joyfully at once, and sat down at the table. Mother and daughter discussed the situation. All the young people in the towns and villages had been taken away. No bribes could close the eyes of the German authorities now. They

might shoot her for escaping. Nor was it safe to live in a forest shelter. At that time the Germans were feverishly building their "Eastern Wall" on the Dnieper, for which they were cutting timber, so that the woods teemed with their men. An officer of the engineers was quartered in the forester's house. It was pure luck that he was away that day.

The mother decided to hide Klava in the cowshed. The walls of the cowshed were made of double wattle frames stuffed with peat and straw for warmth. That night they cleaned the peat out of one of the walls, spread fresh straw in the hollow, and Klava climbed in. Her mother repaired the wattle, leaving a small opening to look like a window. Through this hole she passed Klava food, and through it Klava climbed out on dark nights when the officer was away to get a breath of fresh air, stretch her numb legs, fondle and play with the boy.

Klava lived in that narrow space between the walls of the cowshed from February 1943 to February 1944, all through the autumn rains and cold and the raw, damp days of early spring. There she had remained until two days before, when our units had liberated that region.

And this is the whole story of Mama Klava, told us at the table by Anna Ivanovna in the even voice of one who relates an ordinary, everyday incident.

Now Klava had emerged from her refuge and was sitting here with the boy in her lap. There was a smile on her face as she listened to her mother's tale, playing the while with the child's hands, clapping them and making shadow pictures.

"Where is the resin-tapper; you know, the man who married you, eh?" the pilot asked, trying to induce the boy to come to him as he spoke.

"He won't go to you . . . he won't go to anyone while I'm in the house," said Klava. "Uncle Sashko? He turned out to be a partisan, a liaison man. He's gone off to Zvenigorodka now to set the lumber mill going."

"And what about the kid?"

Klava's black eyebrows knitted alarmingly on her white forehead, bringing to mind a bird flapping its wings.

"Well, what about him? I won't give him up to anyone. . . . He's an orphan. . . ."

"Well, but you're sure to marry. . . . How will you explain to your future husband? And will anyone have you with a child?"

"What is there to explain? If he has sense he'll understand without explanation. . . . And I won't marry a fool. . . ."

And the girl pressed the child to her tightly, as if protecting him from someone, while the curves of her girlish face assumed a pure and bright expression, the expression of maternal tenderness which made her look like the ancient images of the Virgin painted by Rublyov with such true and powerful simplicity.



Maria

IT IS PAINFUL to see a man weep, but to see tears on the tanned, weather-beaten, deeply-wrinkled face of a seasoned soldier is well-nigh unbearable. And when Corporal Nikolai Yefimovich Zaviikhvost's stubborn grey eyes filled with tears a feeling of horror came over everyone; it became so quiet one could hear his heavy, hoarse breathing as he tried to regain his self-control.

"All right, I'll tell you about her all I know," he said finally, sounding as if he had just managed to swallow the lump in his throat. "And what I don't know, or have forgotten, they can add." He nodded towards the Cossacks of his regiment. We were all lying on the bottom of a frozen trench where we had taken shelter from the icy wind that kept sweeping handfuls of stinging sand on our heads. "We used to

call her Maria. Of course she had a last name—Comrade Shevchuk was her name, and she had a rank too—Sergeant-Major of the Medical Corps—but none of us called her anything but Maria. Not Masha, or Marusya, or Musya or the like—just Maria and nothing else. I couldn't tell you why.... She was so sweet to us all, so considerate and attentive... like a sister. She was kind to everyone and had a good word for everybody. Yes," he sighed, "some people are born with such great hearts....

"And she was interested in everything, and was always on the spot to fix things up. She knew every man of us, our Maria. Sometimes, especially in the autumn, the dugout would be packed with people—damp and stuffy, with water dripping from above, squashing underfoot, and trickling down the walls; coats wringing wet and steaming, and a cold sweat seeping through to the very bones. And then she would come in—well, like the sun coming out from behind the clouds, and it would actually become warmer and lighter—honest to God it would. She'd ask one fellow what his wife wrote, she'd show a new boy how to wrap his footcloths so his feet wouldn't chafe, she'd help someone write a letter home.... You ask the boys: nobody could write letters better than she

could—they'd come out so heartylike. Or you'd see her sewing a button on to some soldier's coat. We had a fellow here, a huge guy who looked like a Gypsy, and he never shaved—face like a wiry black brush. Walked around like an unsheared sheep. Well, one day she handed him a razor blade, right in front of everybody. Did we laugh! Our sides almost split. And what d'you think? He's been shaving ever since.

“And that's the way it was. She'd talk a bit, joke, warm your heart like a ray of sunlight and go off to another dugout, and, before she was through there, they'd be calling her from a third: ‘Comrade Maria, come and have a bowl of *kasha* with us!’ And from a fourth: ‘Maria, don't forget us, we've got tea and sugar.’ And she wouldn't forget anyone. She'd greet each man individually and find a cheerful word to say to everybody. That's the kind she was, our Maria.

“Well, and as for her regular job of administering first aid to wounded during battle and getting them off the field—I can tell you straight: I've seen plenty of girls doing this job in my time, sisters of mercy they used to call 'em, I've seen them in the Civil War and in this war, but I've never seen the likes of Maria. Ask any one of the Cossacks, and they'll all tell you I'm not fooling. Shells would be

bursting all around her, bombs exploding, the ground smoking, yet she'd go right on with her work; she'd spot a wounded man, bandage him up and carry him off the field. She saved over a hundred men that way. Me among them. True, I was unconscious then, don't remember how it all happened; but that fellow over there remembers. He didn't faint, remembers exactly what happened; he'll tell you better than I how our Maria worked under fire and how she snatched him, too, from the jaws of death."

Zaviikhvost pointed to a tall, grim-looking Cossack with drooping, tobacco-stained moustaches.

"That's right," the latter began without taking his pipe out of his mouth. He spoke in a deep bass which seemed to come from the bottom of a barrel, slowly enunciating his words. "Saved my life. Dragged me back from the other world, that's how I figure. We were attacking Kerch. Had broken through almost to the city. Not so bad. Our guns had knocked the Germans out. Not a sound from them. But then they rallied, and set their guns going. Hell broke loose. That was when a splinter got me. Both legs at once. I toppled over. There I lay with the blood pouring out of me like out of a bottle. I felt myself growing weaker.

Spots began dancing before my eyes and I knew that meant the end for yours truly. And all around the ground seething like a volcano. Who would stick his nose into that inferno to get me? I even stopped yelling. What was the use? No one would hear. Then all of a sudden came someone's voice: 'Alive?' Maria! It was Maria, the darling, her Cossack hat pushed back, her hair all mussed up. 'Where did it get you?' She was holding a gauze bandage and I could feel her hands running gently over me, soft as fur, 'Grit your teeth, honey,' she said, 'you'll feel better right away. Don't lift your head,' she said, 'they'll blow it off.' 'What about you?' I asked. 'Are you enchanted, or what? Won't anything get you?' And she laughed. Think of it, laughed under fire like that! 'Me!' she said. 'Oh, I know a magic word, a sailor at Odessa told it to me, now nothing can get me.' Meanwhile she was bandaging me up.... Where did a girl like that come from? Where was she born and where did she grow up, our Maria?"

"Oh, I know all that—where she's from and who she is. She told me herself," Zaviikhvost interrupted, "that day, the third time I was wounded, when I was lying there waiting to be evacuated—terrific pain—clenched my teeth until they nearly crumbled and still I could

hardly keep from yelling. Then Maria came up to me, took my hand, smoothed my hair and I felt better right away. But there were others groaning and calling her, I didn't want her to leave me, so I started a conversation. 'Where're you from, sister?' I asked, 'Not from Moscow by any chance?' 'No,' she said. 'I'm from Odessa.'

"She got all warm and rosy when she named her home town. And she began to tell us that she was born in Peresyp, one of the Odessa districts it seems. Her father was a mechanic, or a turner, I don't remember exactly—anyway, a metalworker at the port. She graduated from high school at seventeen and was planning to study to be an agronomist—horticulture. She was fond of orchards—liked the way they blossomed and the idea of growing different kinds of fruit. But then the war came. The Rumanian fascists pushed on Odessa and instead of those orchards, she took a course in nursing, gave up the orchards for the wounded—dragging them off the field and bandaging them up. She said that at first she was scared stiff of blood, used to get dizzy, what d'ye think of that! But then she got used to it, and not only to blood, but to the worst kinds of wounds, and to shells and to mines. She got so she wasn't afraid of anything. And there wasn't a nurse in our regi-

ment, in our whole division practically, more brave or capable than our Maria.”

“Did she ever tell you about the young Odessa sailor that died in her arms, Yefimych?” asked one of the Cossacks who was sitting in the back.

“Of course she did, that’s a story in its own right. Listen. This happened to her in Odessa. There was a young sailor fighting there—a junior lieutenant he was. A real hero, you can see. He led his platoon against the Rumanians. It’s all even steppeland out there, like a table, not even a mole could hide there. Well, almost the whole platoon was cut down. He was the only one who got to the enemy trenches alive. Well, the Rumanians saw him jump into their trench all alone, so they went for him—wanted to take him alive. He grabbed hold of his tommy gun but the lock stuck. So he began to bash them with the butt. They fell on all sides, but more and more kept pushing into the trench, at him like flies after a horse, and still he wouldn’t surrender. Well, our boys—the firing line was a stone’s throw away—saw that the heroic lieutenant would be killed, so they rushed into attack. And what do you think, they got there in time to hurl back the Rumanians. But the lieutenant had already fallen. Not a sound bone in his body—all slashed

and beaten up. And sure enough, Maria was on the spot! She took hold of him and carried him off, not an easy job either, because he kept struggling, trying to get away, back to the battle, you see; but then he grew quiet. 'Nurse,' he said, 'lay me down on this land of mine, because,' he said, 'I'm dying.'

"She laid him down on the ground with his head in her lap; she saw no help would save him. 'Kiss me, nurse,' he said, 'because I'm young and no girl has ever kissed me, and it's a pity to die without that.' Maria kissed him, but his lips were already cold.

"He moved his lips again trying to tell her something else. She put her ear close and heard: 'Tell my boys, if any one is still alive, not to forget me, to avenge my death,' he said.

"The lieutenant's words, you could see, sank deep into Maria's heart. 'Whenever I get frightened, or it gets hard,' she told us, 'I think of that young sailor, the junior lieutenant, and his last words.' "

Zaviikhvost stopped talking, turned away, scratched at the frozen sand of the trench breastwork with his fingernail, screwed up his eyes at the sharp wind, heaved a long sigh, and went on:

"She left Odessa with the last boat, after the last stretcher with wounded was carried from

the shore. From Sevastopol she was taken away on a submarine. . . . She had been wounded herself, yet she had gone on removing others till the last minute. After that she landed in our Cossack unit and stayed with us all the way from Kerch to this place—what d'ye call it—the Carpathians. She was with the Cossacks all the time, in battle and during our free time. She left us only twice when she was wounded herself, and both times she returned from the hospital before her time was up.

“You can't imagine how used to her we got, to our Maria. A battle would be raging and roaring, the artillery booming, planes dropping bombs, bullets whizzing, everybody hugging Mother Earth, but she would jump out of a trench and start crawling over the ground, as slick as a lizard. And before you knew it she was crawling back dragging a wounded man.

“The men grumbled at her, the older ones would say: ‘Where are you going? What d'ye mean by tempting fate like that?’ And she would laugh: ‘I'm enchanted. Splinters fly right over me,’ she would say, ‘and bullets curve past me. That's a fact.’ ”

Zaviikhvost was silent for a while, then he suddenly turned sharply to his neighbour, who

had not once taken his pipe out of his mouth and said:

"Got any tobacco?"

"You don't smoke, Zaviikhvost," answered the man in a deep voice as he grudgingly reached into his pocket for his tobacco pouch.

"Don't smoke, don't smoke! Too tight to give me a pinch of tobacco, eh? Stingy devil!" grumbled Zaviikhvost, rolling a big, clumsy cigarette with trembling fingers.

His hand shook so that it took him a long time to light the cigarette from his neighbour's pipe. He grimaced and coughed all the while. Finally he got it lighted, choked a bit over the smoke, and went on with his story, his voice now hollow and husky.

"And really, it seemed as if she did know a magic word: the bullets actually avoided her and the shrapnel flew past her. Until the very last day.

"We were fighting here, in these very parts—in Poland, that is. And in autumn the fighting here was good and stiff. We'd attacked about five times that day and as many times our attack petered out, the fire was so terrific.

"The Germans had every inch of ground covered with their guns, and the land, you can see, is flat. You could spot a beetle on the ground five miles away. Well, after the Germans had

beat back our fifth attack, that Cossack over there," Zaviikhvost pointed to an olive-skinned, black-browed Cossack who was listening to him attentively, "that fellow dropped in full view of the Germans in that god-damned no man's land, exactly half way between us and them.

"He lay there face down, and whenever the guns let up we could hear him groan. How the devil could anybody get to him there with bullets whistling and splinters whizzing—a regular pandemonium! But our Maria was right there, just as if someone had called her. We saw her run lightly through the trench and spring up onto the breastwork. We could hardly believe our eyes. There she was crawling over the ground. The battalion commander himself, the major, shouted to her: 'Where're you going? Get back! Get back!' She made as if she didn't hear him and kept on going. We saw her reach the wounded man and start fussing around...."

"Yes, I was sure I was done for already," the good-looking Cossack said in a pleasant tenor, blushing like a girl. "Who would help me with shells plunging over the ground like a drove of mad horses? Then suddenly I felt someone tear my shirt and uncover the wound—a cool breeze blew over it.... I thought I

was delirious, or that I was dying and beginning to grow cold. So I thought I'd take a look at the world for the last time. I opened my eyes, Maria! 'Does it hurt?' she asked. 'Hold on, honey,' she said, 'you'll feel better soon.'

"Meanwhile the Germans had sighted her—and they let go, straight at her. The bullets hummed like beetles round a willow tree. 'For God's sake, leave me and crawl back, nurse,' I begged. 'It's the end of me anyhow; at least you can get away....' She went on bandaging me, shaking her head, as if to say, 'that's not nice, friend, to talk that way.' She'd taken offence, you see! 'Hold on to my neck, tight,' she said. And she began to slowly crawl back to our lines. Before she'd gone ten metres I suddenly felt a spasm; she stopped, then sank down altogether and put me down on the ground. I saw the blood staining her tunic. She was white as a sheet, and she whispered: 'I'm dying,' she said, 'goodbye, Cossack. If you live—tell the men not to forget me.' Then she drooped like that birch tree over there and grew still."

The Cossack suddenly waved his hand, jumped up, and turning away from the others, stood on the breastwork facing the icy wind.

"Down, you fool, you'll be hit," Zaviikhvost ordered him. "And from the trench," he went on, "we saw a sniper, the fascist cur, aim at

our Maria, our sister of mercy with a wounded man on her back," he went on hastily, as if loathe to have me see him, a Cossack, in a weak moment. "Well, I can't describe what happened after that. Without any orders the Cossacks rose and poured over the breast-work.

" 'For Maria!' someone yelled. 'For Maria!' the rest thundered and they rushed right into the hail of bullets, across the mine field, over the barbed wire.

"Hardly a minute had passed before we were inside the German trenches working with our daggers. Others were still running forward, jumping over us, going after the Germans who were trying to get away.

" 'For our Maria! Take this, and this!'

"A month has passed since that day, but our Cossacks haven't gotten over it. . . . Well, what's the use of talking—Maria, our nurse, is no more. . . ."

And that is when I saw two big tears gather in the old soldier's eyes, well over, and trickle down his weather-beaten face. . . .

Later, at the small Polish town of Dąbrowy Wielky, on a lively frontline highroad, the Cossacks showed me the little grave—a red obelisk crowned with a gold star and solicitously in-

closed by a low fence made out of trophy shells.

Engraved on the obelisk's copper plaque were the following words:

"Sergeant-Major of the Medical Corps, Maria Shevchuk."

The photograph under an oval-shaped glass showed a delicately moulded girl's face with large eyes, looking at the world gaily and lovingly. Locks of wavy hair protruded from under her Cossack hat. On the mound lay red geraniums, not yet wilted, and no one knew when or by whom they had been placed there, along that frontline road.

And although the flowers lay on ground that was hard with frost and chilled by icy winds, they retained all their freshness. Nor did that surprise anyone who knew the story of Maria Shevchuk.



Blood Brothers

IN THE hard-fought battle for the Polish town of Debica, this battalion was given a special assignment. It had orders to pierce the front line, break through to the station of Czarna behind the German defences, and capture the railroad which supplied the whole enemy group: capture it and hold it until the main objective—the town and its fortifications—was in the hands of the Soviet Army.

The outcome of the whole battle depended to a certain extent on the men's staunchness. They realized that.

The battalion pierced the front line and, although the gap immediately closed behind it, advanced some seven kilometres and got a light hold on the railroad. Cut off from their own troops, supplied with ammunition by air and with nothing to eat but the potatoes which

they dug up right there on the field of action, the officers and men fought for three days, holding off enemy attacks on all sides. And they did not budge. Only when the town had been captured and the outcome of the battle decided in favour of the Soviet Army was the order to withdraw radioed to the battalion.

This was by no means an easy task. Once more the battalion had to pierce the front line, this time in the reverse direction. All of the escort ordnance was sent forward. Only the anti-tank battery in which Sergeant Ivan Naumov was in charge of a gun crew remained in the rear, with orders to cover the withdrawal. The gunners fought tenaciously, beating back the attacks of German tanks, which were hard pressing the retreating units. They crippled three "Tigers" and about a dozen armoured troop carriers. But the most important thing was that by repulsing the tank attack they prevented the Germans from cutting off the withdrawal of our battalion. The battery itself, however, was practically wiped out in this last combat. Naumov's gun was smashed and he himself was wounded in the shoulder, the leg, and the left arm, and fell unconscious not far from his mangled gun.

He came to only at sunrise of the next day, when the cold autumn dew seeped through his

uniform, chilling him to the bone. It was already light. He lay in the furrow of a potato field hidden from view by the wilted leaves. Naumov took off his cap, raised himself on the elbow of his sound arm and took a look around.

The sight that met his eyes a short distance away made him fall back to the ground at once. About a dozen Germans in dark tunics with the brass badges of field police dangling from their necks were finishing off the wounded. They were going about their job with absolute unconcern, bandying words back and forth, smoking and joking, just as if this were not a violation of all human laws but merely an ordinary task like gathering in the harvest.

Just then one of the Germans came up to a wounded man whom Naumov recognized as Private Grikor Kinosyan, an elderly Communist, loved by the whole battery for his common sense and intelligence, his great heart and unfailing readiness to offer people help and advice. Everybody, sometimes even the commander himself, called him "Pop." Naumov heard Kinosyan shout: "God damn you, fascist fiends!" Through the leaves he saw Kinosyan cover his face with his arm for protection. And immediately a tommy gun rattled

above him. Everything swam before Naumov's eyes and he again fainted away.

The sun was already high when he regained consciousness. The earth exuded a warm dampness and the acrid smell of potato leaves. Swallows soared noiselessly high above, a sign of clear weather. The field was deserted. The plundered corpses with their pockets turned inside out remained in their former places. Suddenly Naumov thought he heard a groan. Yes, there was no mistake. Someone was uttering prolonged and piteous groans! Naumov tore some rags from his undershirt to bandage his wounds, mustered all his strength, and crawled off in the direction of the groans, dragging his wounded leg.

It was Kinosyan groaning. He was drenched in blood and his tunic and trousers were covered with dark red stains, not yet dry. The bullets of the *Feldpolizei* had hit only his hand, but this additional wound had evidently made him faint. That had saved him: the Germans thought him dead. Now he lay with his head thrown back and groaned, gasping for air with black, cracked lips.

"Well, what are we going to do now, you and I, Pop?" muttered Naumov looking at the insensible body. "This is what we'll do: first we'll give you some water—that's one; then

we'll bandage up—that's two; then we'll carry you off into the shade—that's three; and there you'll come to and we'll put our heads together, to size up the situation. Well, wait a bit.... God almighty, this leg of mine.... I'm not much of a walker now." Then, using his belt for a sling and dragging his leg behind him, he went crawling over the field.

He found first-aid kits in the knapsacks of the dead men, even managed to get hold of a flask of water. He gave Kinosyan a drink, moistened his brow, and managed to bring him round. Then he inspected his wounds, whistled dolefully and with the practised hand of a seasoned soldier set about bandaging them, muttering to himself all the while. He made haste. The German burial detachment might arrive any minute. Kinosyan moaned quietly and kept fainting away. He was so weak he could hardly keep a hold on Naumov, let alone crawl. What should they do?

Naumov thought for a minute. Then he slipped his belt under Kinosyan's armpits, heaved him onto his back, buckled the belt across his own chest, and crawled off with his burden. He made for the edge of the forest, overgrown with small beech trees already touched by autumn. He moved very slowly. His heart

beat so hard he thought it would burst. Green spots danced before his eyes and everything would become a blur—the yellowing grove, the grey fields with the wilted plumes of potato leaves, and the horizon with pink-streaked, luminous-edged clouds. Losing consciousness, he would sink slowly to the warm earth and lie there pinned down by his burden until he gradually came to again and crawled on, sick with dizziness and nausea.

It became harder and harder for him to move. Clenching his teeth, he strained every nerve. Kinosyan could not help him in any way. He kept muttering in delirium, but so quietly and indistinctly that it was impossible to make out the words. Naumov, who was but half-conscious himself and constantly fighting off a coma, mumbled soothingly:

“It’s all right, don’t lose heart, we’ll get there right away.” And in surprise: “Gee, you’re heavy, Pop, skinny as a rail, but heavy as lead!”

Naumov crawled on across the potato field until dusk. The field seemed endless. The yellow beech grove appeared to recede as he approached it and its quivering golden leaves lured him from afar, making him dizzier than ever.

It was dark by the time he reached the first

trees. The sun had sunk below the horizon and a thick, cool mist blanketed the field. Only a few metres more and he would be in the wood. There they would be in comparative safety. But that short distance took him a whole hour: Naumov's sound leg could no longer stand the strain of the burden and he covered these last few metres by pushing himself along on his elbows and squirming like a worm. His face became scratched by brambles. At last he laid his comrade down in a dense blackberry thicket, fixed his bandages and moistened his head with water from the flask. When Kinosyan finally came round, Naumov himself lay in a faint, and now it was Grikor's turn to unfasten his friend's collar and wet his face with the remaining water, although he wanted to drink it so badly that his throat contracted spasmodically.

It was some time before they finally mustered the strength to sit up, smile at each other and discuss the situation. Things looked pretty bad. Here they were behind German lines, wounded, helpless, unarmed and without a crust of bread to eat. Judging by the loud, sharp reports of firing, the front line was somewhere close at hand. They were right in the middle of the German forward positions.

"Well, Ivan, what do you say?" Kinosyan

said in a low voice, screwing up his kind, large eyes ruefully.

With his sound hand Naumov took out his tobacco pouch. Kinosyan also had one good arm, and with his help Naumov untied the strings and rolled two cigarettes. Even lighting up proved a job, but they finally managed it: Kinosyan held the box, while Naumov struck the match. They smoked with real enjoyment, shading the glowing ends with their palms.

By the time the dark August night descended upon the fields, and the beech leaves, wet with mist, shone like tin in the moonlight, Naumov was rested and felt a new surge of strength. He camouflaged his comrade, who was unconscious again, with twigs and crawled back to the field in a comparatively short time. There he found a helmet, two knives, two tommy guns and cartridges. On the way back he discovered a brook, tore out the leather headguard from his helmet and filled the helmet with water. Holding the strap between his teeth so as not to spill the precious liquid, he brought it safely to their place of refuge.

When they had drunk their fill of the water, which tasted slightly of iron, both men felt better.

“Well, we’ve already gathered a few belongings. Ever read *Robinson Crusoe*, Pop? You and me, we’re army Robinson Crusoes, and we’ve got to start from scratch.”

Whenever he had had a stroke of luck, Naumov became talkative. Kinosyan, weak from loss of blood and suffering from acute pain, merely smiled back with his cracked, blackened lips.

“Sure enough, that’s what we are—Robinson Crusoes,” Naumov rattled on, coughing now and then from the heavy *makhorka* smoke. “Setting up housekeeping on the bare ground, you might say. And cannibals all around. . . . But you just wait, Pop, we’ll be raising chickens and ducks yet; we’ll set up a regular dairy farm.”

Inside his cap Naumov found some threaded needles and a piece of twine with bristle attached. With his one hand he mended his torn tunic. He whetted the salvaged knife on a pebble till it was sharp as a razor, carved two spoons out of juniper blocks, holding them tight between his knees, hollowed out a cup of sorts, and built a stone hearth next to an old birch stump. Everything he did he did well, and whenever he accomplished any small thing, whether it was a successful sally after ears of wheat for porridge, or making

a rod on which to hang the messtin over the fire, he was as pleased with himself as a child. When there was nothing to do and the weather was clear and calm so that he was unable to go on a sally, Naumov got fidgety, moody and depressed. In times like these Kinosyan came to the rescue. Too feeble even to sit up, he nevertheless always found some means of rousing the other's energetic nature: he might say musingly, "Wonder what the boys at the battery are doing now," or ask about Naumov's family, or about the kolkhoz, or else he would start a conversation on the sergeant's favourite subject—horses. This would cheer Naumov up and set him going; he would get so interested in telling his story that he would forget about caution and have to be told to lower his voice.

Sometimes on such idle days, Naumov would lie down beside his comrade and begin to ask him questions in a low voice. His enquiring mind was always troubled by things he was unable to understand.

"Listen, Pop, what sort of rotten philosophy is it that teaches these fascists to kill people? Where did it come from? You know what I think? I think it's a leftover from when men were beasts. With us, it's different. With us—if you want to live well, then work, brother,

and you'll live well. Right? If you want to live still better, no objection, brother—work still harder, without sparing yourself, and you'll live wonderful. Fine for me, and fine for everybody else. Fine all around. But take the Germans now—Fritz or Hans, or whatever his name is. He wants to live well, so Hitler says to him: you want to live well?—take a tommy gun and go after other people's property. Right? And that's bad for that fool Fritz, 'cause he'll get smashed, the worm, and it's no picnic for Hitler either, 'cause his Hitleria is cracking from top to bottom. So what's the sense, huh? What do they want to start wars for, drenching the land in blood?"

Kinosyan would start explaining in his weak voice how German fascism had come into being and how it had poisoned the minds of the German people. Naumov listened attentively to his halting speech.

"I see it this way," he replied, chewing a blade of grass and watching the autumn clouds through the blackberry bushes as they drifted rapidly across the sky, "I see it this way: if a fellow sets people stealing other people's property, no matter who he is, an ordinary thief, or a minister, or a führer, then, good people, tie him up and throw him in jail. The people should get together and tie up all these fas-

cists, capitalists and all kinds of bandits and thieves, ship them off to a desert island and say to them: learn to work, you sons o'bitches, learn to be useful. And the people should make a compact among themselves: no more war, fellows, we'll help one another. Some life we'd have then!"

Carried away by his dreams of remaking the world, Naumov would sit up, push back his cap and make a great effort to tone down his loud voice:

"You and I, Pop, we'd live in a mansion. We'd make machines that'd do all the work. The machine would do everything. And when a fellow had put in his hour of work, he'd do whatever he pleased: take out your line if you like fishing, or sling a gun over your shoulder if it's hunting you prefer, or pick up a book and study to your heart's content."

"That's what we do already; it's down in our Constitution," said Kinosyan, and the shadow of a gentle smile brightened his pale, haggard face.

"I know, it's written down, but here we are forced to go to war. And besides, I don't mean only you and me, I mean the whole world. Life would be wonderful then!"

They were silent for a while, listening to the nearby firing, the loud hollow rapping of a

woodpecker, the hushed rustle of dry autumn leaves.

“Before the war I wasn’t interested in politics at all. Too much to do on the kolkhoz. I had a stud farm under me, brother. What horses! None like ’em in all the Kuban! Up to my ears in work, never got any further than the horses’ stalls. . . . You’re a Communist—tell me now: when we finish off fascism, will there be peace forever? Will we say—we’ve had our fill of war, fellows—enough! The whole world has been soaked in blood. Surely that’s enough!”

“Peace forever, that’s not an easy thing to get, Ivan. Who can we make it with? The people? But the people have no say over there, in America and England. Nobody listens to them. So you’d have to talk to the capitalist, wouldn’t you? And what objection has he to war? Is it his tears or his blood that flow? It’s money that flows to him, Ivan. We’ll fight for peace, of course, we don’t want war. . . .”

“It’s a fact, Pop, the whole business is all wrong. . . . If it was up to me I’d do everything different, just so’s there wouldn’t be any war, so’s there wouldn’t even be a word for it. Believe me. . . .”

They would sometimes discourse like this for a whole day, hushing each other up whenever their voices got too loud.

Then the spell of calm weather would come to an end. The wind would come roaring through the forest and the loud rustle of dry leaves would drown out all other sounds. Then Naumov would get busy again. He would crawl out of sight into the brush, and return soaking wet, bringing back a capful of blackberries. He would feed his comrade and eat some himself. After that he'd wash and bandage both their wounds and crawl off again to return with pockets full of mushrooms and potatoes.

When the mist enveloped the treetops as well as the ground, the friends would make a bonfire and cook a soup of mushrooms and potatoes which they devoured ravenously. Little by little their life fitted into a schedule of its own.

"We're night birds now, like the screech-owl," Naumov observed. "We sleep in the daytime and at night we're up and about."

The moment he was through eating he would shut his eyes and sleep like a log.

Kinosyan slept little—the wound in his leg was too painful.

He lay there and listened. In the mornings, when the air was damp and clear and sounds carried farther than usual, he could sometimes even make out snatches of German speech, the bar of a song, an oath. But a man gets used to

all manner of things and so did Kinosyan. He got used to the proximity of the enemy, in the same way that a soldier gets used to the whine of bullets, the swish of shells overhead, the harrowing mewling of mortar bombs.

The friends even began to consider themselves in comparative safety: to whom would it ever occur to go snooping through the underbrush in the frontline zone? On windy days Naumov extended the range of his activities. Porridge appeared more often on the friends' menu. They cooked it at sunrise, when the mist was thickest; cooked it of wheat and rye, of the grain that Naumov shook into his cap from the sheaves left in the field.

"You can't down a Soviet soldier, Pop, even if he has only one leg and one arm, as long as he has a head on his shoulders," he boasted, returning from one of his sallies.

Even when their matches gave out he wasn't disheartened for long. He found a flint in his pocket and they produced fire in the following way: Kinosyan, whose left arm was sound, held the flint and lint while Naumov struck sparks with his sound right hand. Their tobacco had long since given out. They smoked dry moss.

When they had been in the forest fourteen days Naumov fashioned a neat crutch out of

some branches and went hobbling briskly about with it. On windy days, when the beech leaves swished furiously and incessantly, like a waterfall, he would venture on long trips. One day he came back in high spirits. He had discovered a German communications wire in the forest connecting the rear with the front line, and now he had real work to do. He camouflaged Kinosyan carefully with twigs, slung a tommy gun around his neck, hid a grenade under his tunic and hobbled off on his crutch. He went as far away as possible from the place where his friend was lying and snipped all four wires.

He returned proud and happy. He was fighting. He was inflicting damage on the enemy.

"It's not so easy to get a Russian soldier down," he said, describing his sally in detail to his friend.

Twice he got away with it. The third time the alarmed Germans laid an ambush at the lines. But Naumov noticed them in time. He limped off into the bushes quietly, lay down and kept an eye on the enemy. He stayed there till dark, laughing to himself: "Go on, keep your eyes skinned, go on. I'm in no hurry." And as soon as the Germans left he not only cut the line, but carried a good-sized piece of wire away and hid it in a stream.

Thus began a tug of war between a wounded Soviet soldier, cast adrift by fate behind enemy lines, and the Germans of the telephone platoon. After Naumov's sixth demolition act the enemy gave up. The wires were removed from the woods and the line made a wide detour through the fields, over open ground.

Naumov exulted in his victory. But his elation did not last long. He was overcome by the blues. When he was inflicting damage on the Germans he felt he was doing his bit in the war, helping his comrades. Now that he no longer had this work to do he wanted nothing so much as to get back to his comrades over there, on the other side of the front line.

He had recovered sufficiently to have tried to make his way back. But Kinosyan's wounds healed more slowly. He could hardly move about. Noticing that Naumov had become gloomy and nervous, and realizing that this was due to impatience, Kinosyan said to him one day:

"Look here, Ivan, thanks for everything you've done for me. But why should you suffer on account of me? Here's what I have to say: leave me and make your way back. When I get a bit better, I'll try to follow. If I get through—fine, if not—don't worry, I'll die an

honourable death. Go ahead. At least one of us will get out alive."

He had his say and regretted it. Naumov began to beat the ground with his crutch furiously.

"What do you think I am? Who do you take me for, that you can insult me like that? Me, a Red Army Sergeant, a Soviet person—and you want me to quit a wounded comrade? Maybe you went off your nut while I was fetching the water?"

Then suddenly his eyes sparkled with animation and boldness and he whispered, all aglow with the desire for action:

"We'll get away, Pop, we'll get away together."

To get away, to get back to their own people! This dream dominated all the friends' thoughts. Several nights in succession Naumov crawled off to the German forward lines, got past the trenches as far as the barbed wire. Meanwhile, fighting the pain of his still open wounds, Kinosyan practised crawling. He trained persistently until he was completely exhausted for he wanted to be as little a burden to his comrade as possible.

At last Naumov found a suitable place for crossing over. The forward line extended along the edge of the woods here. Beyond it stretched

a field of unharvested wheat, trampled and beaten down by the autumn rains. The Germans' fortifications were located in the woods, while their barbed wire and the foxholes of their frontline pickets were in the wheat. The Red Army positions lay on the other side of the field.

One windy night, when the forest hissed and howled and furious blasts of wind tore across the fields, drowning out all other sounds, Naumov lifted his wounded comrade onto his back and hobbled off with him through the brush to the edge of the forest. When they got to the wheat field Naumov tied bunches of straw onto his own and Kinosyan's head and back, and they quietly crawled off through the wheat towards their own trenches.

Through the noise of the wind they could clearly hear German speech and the squeak of a harmonica. The black silhouette of a sentry standing under a shaggy tree loomed in the darkness. They crawled past him. They had to move silently and slowly, holding their breath and this made it all the harder. Their hearts beat furiously in their breasts and they went cold inside. An overpowering desire to lie down, bury their faces in the slippery straw, inhale the luscious smell of wheat, and rest, if only for one minute, came over them. But the

proximity of their own army drew them on like a powerful magnet, making them forget their aching wounds, the danger, and even the desire for a moment's rest.

Naumov crawled in front, silently pointing out to his comrade the hairlike wires of buried mines protruding from the ground, the camouflaged network of signal ropes. He deftly crept under the barbed wire without touching it and stopped to wait for Kinosyan. But the latter's limp arm brushed the signal wire. Immediately a flare soared up into the sky. Naumov sprang to Kinosyan and pressed him to the ground. For an instant, while the deadly light quivered above them, they were motionless. Then, when the flare faded away they quickly crawled into a bomb crater and waited. Immediately a burst of fire came down upon the spot they had just left. Everything was well ranged here. Tracer bullets studded the sky like a shower of stars. With an evil hiss they ripped through the night, pinged off the clay earth, and tore on and on, their fiery paths crossing.

The Germans became restless. All night long the whitish light of flares quivered above their trenches. And only just before dawn did the firing begin to quiet down.

And at dawn, a guard of the forward Soviet outpost suddenly jumped back and

grabbed his tommy gun. From the bushes in front of him, as though from the bowels of the earth, rose a man—unshaven, bearded to the very eyes, emaciated, and so black that he looked charred, wearing a tattered Red Army uniform and carrying a tommy gun slung over his shoulder. He was supporting another soldier who looked like a skeleton. In a hoarse, choking voice the first man said:

“Don’t shoot. Call your superior.”

And, swaying, they both sank to the ground before the sentry had a chance to order them to lie down.

About two hours later a creaking Polish two-horse cart arrived within regiment lines. On the straw in the bottom lay Ivan Naumov and Grikor Kinosyan covered with a carpet. The soldiers and officers of the outposts where they landed had given them a generous feed, and now the friends were sleeping like logs.

Naumov and Kinosyan are alive! This news spread through the regiment with lightning speed and everyone who was free that day ran outside to meet the cart.

And whenever it halted in a village, a large crowd gathered around it.

The soldiers stood there and looked at them, sleeping so peacefully in the hay—two men

who had survived incredible ordeals through the miracle of friendship.

"Well, where are they, the blood brothers?" asked Major Novikov, assistant regimental commander for political affairs, pushing through the crowd to the cart.

And this fine epithet stuck to them. From that time till the very end of the war the men in the regiment called them blood brothers, thus doing homage to the great, all-conquering, invincible friendship of soldiers at war.



The Grave of the Unknown Soldier

DURING my travels through liberated Europe after the war I saw many graves of unknown soldiers. They were usually located on large squares in capitals or on lovely hills in their suburbs and were marked by impressive monuments. Electric torches burned over them day and night. Staid gardeners in smart uniforms cut the luxuriant lawns around them. Nearby, nurses in starched caps watched their curled and perfumed infants. Involuntarily the pompousness of these graves made me think that it could not be very comfortable for the poor soldier underground, whose unknown mother, deprived of her breadwinner, had probably died of starvation, and whose wife, if she managed to survive, may have stooped to God knows what in order to feed his fatherless children.

No, it is not these fine, hypocritical sarcophagi which adorn the capitals of capitalist countries that come to my mind now. This story is not about them. I shall tell you about the grave of an unknown soldier that I saw in the summer of 1944 under a spreading maple tree growing on a hill at the fork of the roads leading out of the ancient Ukrainian town of Slavuta. It was not the art of the sculptor nor the skill of the architect, nor the heavy majesty of marble, granite and bronze that attracted people to this low mound, lovingly covered with green turf. Only a squat oaken obelisk marked it then, and on the obelisk, a village carpenter had clumsily carved a somewhat unusual inscription: "Here lies the unknown Red Army hero, Misha. He died for his country and for his comrades in the accursed *Grosslazaret*. Peace to his valiant soul."

When we visited this grave, the ruins on the outskirts of Slavuta were still smoking amidst orchards withered by the heat; the carcasses of huge bloodhounds with bared teeth, shot by our soldiers, still lay in the barbed-wire corridors that inclosed the territory of the *Grosslazaret*, and army ambulances were taking away those living skeletons whom the Soviet Army had saved from death at the last minute. The memory of the "unknown Red

Army hero, Misha" was still quite fresh, and the soldiers of the advancing units, stopping for the night in the surrounding villages and hamlets, heard endless stories from the old folk, the men, and the women, about his extraordinary exploit, which had not yet acquired the tinge of legend. Dawn would bring an end to the men's brief respite and the units would continue advancing along the roads south and southwest. When they reached the grave underneath the maple tree, infantrymen would hastily pull off their caps and helmets, cavalrymen would rein in their horses, drivers would slow down their cars. Here and there a soldier would detach himself from the dusty, tired column and run to the mound, placing there a bunch of wild poppies or cornflowers, gathered on the way, or a plain wreath made by a nurse out of compress paper dyed with drugs. He would linger for a moment under the maple tree, brush away a tear with his sweat-stained sleeve, and run off after his company.

These simple gifts, marks of sincere respect, covered the mound from top to bottom and hung from the branches of the old maple tree, which covered the grave with an awning of luxuriant green foliage shot through with sunbeams.

I was told the story of the "unknown Red Army hero, Misha" by the men and women of the surrounding villages. Before I begin to relate it, however, it is necessary to describe the scene of action—the so-called *Grosslazaret* in Slavuta. This was, probably, one of the blackest creations of fascism's diabolic imagination, a gigantic slaughterhouse for wounded and crippled war prisoners, run under the protection of a Red Cross flag. Wounded war prisoners were brought here from almost the entire Dnieper front. Monsters in physicians' robes infected them with various diseases, experimented on them with poisons and poison gases, and then the few who managed to survive were shot on the brink of an enormous grave, dug for them in a wood about five kilometres away from this fantastic institution.

None of those who told me the story knew the exact identity of the unknown Red Army man, who had proudly refused to tell the hospital administration his name, rank or unit. Some said he was a scout who had crossed the Dnieper to reconnoitre the Germans' "Eastern Wall." Others declared he had been flown to the enemy rear to establish contact with local partisan detachments. Still others asserted that he was a Soviet demolition man who operated boldly on the Rovno-Lvov Railway. But all

agreed that he was a Soviet soldier brought to the *Grosslazaret* in one of the groups of war prisoners and that he had serious bullet wounds in both legs; and they all said that as soon as he found himself in the isolator (a huge, concrete chamber lacking all furnishings, where so many men were herded that day that there was no room to lie down or even to sit down) he began to urge the men to make their escape. During the first hours of quarantine he was unconscious. To keep him from being crushed in the crowd, Misha's comrades laid him on the window sill. As soon as he came to, he began to urge his comrades to action.

At first no one would listen to him. Indeed, it seemed as if only a madman could dream of escape with festering wounds on both legs, crudely bandaged with dirty rags torn from his shirt. But in the morning, after several wounded men had died in the swaying crowd which packed the concrete room, and the corpses, pressed in on all sides, could not even fall, but continued standing and swaying with the living, many began to feel that truly it would be better to die fighting the guards than to perish from humiliating torture in this accursed slaughterhouse, like these unfortunates who even after death were forced to remain standing.

And the man called Misha, a short, black-haired fellow with a curly beard mounting to his very eyebrows and a feverish glow in his brown, almond-shaped eyes, sat on the window sill and, in defiance of the spies whom the fascists usually slipped into every group of war prisoners, kept darting barbed, angry words at the crowd:

"The ones who've died, they're lucky," he said pointing to the corpses. "You'll be killed too, but first they'll torture you plenty—experiment on you, like on rabbits or guinea pigs."

"What about yourself? Think they're going to take pity on you?"

"What's he plaguing us for? Hey, you, over there, shut his mouth for him; make him stop his croaking."

"Croaking! He's telling the truth. Why should we wait like calves at a slaughterhouse, till it's our turn to get the knife."

"That's right, friends, better to die from a bullet than rot away in our own stink, like them. If luck's with us, maybe we can take along a fascist pig or two to the other world."

"What'll you do, fight tommy guns with your fist, or what?"

"Why not? Better to die five times over

than to let a fascist test out his poison on you, a Soviet citizen," cried Misha from the window.

"You said it, boy!"

The crowd murmured, gradually becoming wrought up with fury. Terrible oaths sounded in the foul air. The wounded man on the window sill kept adding fuel to the fire, the whites of his inflamed eyes gleaming.

" 'Better to die a thousand times o'er than to live, a prisoner of war,' as the saying goes."

Perhaps it was during this horrible night, when that solid wall of living and dead swayed in the isolator of the *Grosslazaret*, perhaps on that very night the spark fell that kindled the idea of the mass flight of prisoners which took place some twenty days before Soviet troops liberated Slavuta. Perhaps that escape, subsequently so much talked and written about, sprouted from the seeds the soldier Misha planted that night in the tortured souls of those men, exhausted from hunger, wounds, and lack of air. Who knows? But that is not what I want to write about now. I want to describe what happened to Misha himself on the day after he arrived in Slavuta.

Possibly the *Grosslazaret* administration learned through its numerous informers that

the new group of wounded was infected with the idea of rebellion. Possibly it had been informed about the soldier who had proudly refused to reveal his name and the number of his army unit. And possibly it was only that Misha and the other wounded men were considered too weak to serve for their monstrous experiments. In any case, on the next day the specialists who distributed new arrivals isolated him along with twenty-one others who were wounded in arms or legs. They were not even taken to the barracks, but were again locked up in the isolator. And Misha realized that they were to be put to death on that very day. The others also realized this. A painful silence reigned in this concrete chamber reeking of carbolic acid, ammonia and filth. Some sat on the floor, leaning motionless against the wall; others dozed in corners, mumbling and crying out in their sleep. Misha gazed through the barred window at the bright sunbeams sparkling in a tub of foul green water standing at the entrance to the isolator, at the fluffy, golden-edged clouds drifting across the blue summer sky.

“Oh, to lie in the sun once more, boys—in the sand on a riverbank! To sun yourself somewhere in a quiet nook,” he said unexpectedly.

"We'll lie in the sand all right, but as for the sun—it's not for us; we'll never see the sun again," remarked a red-haired soldier with a round, close-cropped head which looked as if it had been gilded. He wore the badge of an Expert Gunner on his torn, bloodstained tunic.

"Yes, we've done all the fighting we'll ever do; they'll have to take Berlin without us," boomed a glum-looking barefoot infantryman, and gnashing his teeth he emitted hoarsely: "The things those god-damned fascists are doing! If the boys from our regiment only knew...."

This gloomy, round-shouldered fellow was sitting in a corner. Ever since the first rays of dawn had pushed through the bars of the square windows, he had been scratching the hard lime wall with a nail as stubbornly as a maniac. Before he went to his death he wanted to tell the Soviet soldiers who would soon take the *Grosslazaret* what the fascists did with wounded war prisoners. He scratched away at the wall indefatigably; it took him about ten minutes to draw each letter. The rasp of the iron nail on the stonelike plaster gave the men no peace.

"Are we going to wait for death like this?" Misha suddenly shouted, tearing his gaze away

from the bright colours of the summer sky. "Let them see this, the vermin," and he thumbed his nose in the direction from which came the sound of the sentry's footsteps, rhythmic and unhurried like the ticking of a pendulum.

He had shouted so furiously that all the men in the isolator turned around, tearing themselves away from their gloomy thoughts. Even those who were sleeping woke up, even the indefatigable infantryman stopped scraping away with his nail.

"We've still got some fight left in us, god-dam them all!"

"Without arms and without legs," the artilleryman smiled wryly.

And indeed, all the men in the isolator had their arms in slings or their legs bandaged with dirty rags.

"We've got teeth, haven't we? What are they for?" cried Misha, lifting himself on his hands until he was sitting on the window sill. Two rows of strong, dazzling white teeth flashed formidably from behind the curly brush of moustache and beard. "I'll sink my teeth into some fascist's throat!"

"Well, teeth aren't much use, but what if we smash some Fritz's head with a crutch, we could kill him that way, huh?" The infantryman, who had been scratching his

last will and testament on the wall, perked up.

“Yes, or knock him off his feet and strangle him.”

“Or sock him with a rock, as a farewell gift, or give him a kick in the solar plexus with your boot. That’s a sure finish, a kick like that. Back in a battle near Moscow, in a hand-to-hand fight, I sent one of these devils to hell that way. He grabbed hold of my rifle and I gave him one in the solar plexus.”

It was as if Misha had let a fresh breeze into the stuffy room. Suggestions came from all sides. Here, in this concrete cell, encircled by double inclosures of barbed wire between which famished hounds ran day and night, encircled by another palisade charged with a high tension electric current, guarded by a sentry carrying a tommy gun—in this dungeon men who were wounded, unarmed and completely exhausted, were absorbed in dreams of how they would give the enemy their last battle.

“I read somewhere, comrades—don’t remember where—or maybe I didn’t read it, just came to my head—that a soldier isn’t defeated until he admits defeat himself,” said Misha, his eyes gleaming. He was sitting in the window recess with his back to the red glow of the sunset,

so that he seemed himself to be radiating a menacing light. "The main thing is not to get cold feet, not to funk, and then we'll show these fascist pigs a thing or two."

"It's clear, they're going to shoot us. Waiting till it gets dark. That's the rotten way they do things—shoot in the dark. Never in the daytime, only at night," remarked the seasoned artilleryman.

"That'll be better. They'll take us out of the camp to shoot us. They always look for deserted places to do such things in, far away from habitations. And in that case, we'll not only knock off a few, but maybe some of us will even get away, what d'ye think?" said the infantryman.

He had forgotten all about his last will and testament, and was so completely engrossed by the idea of a final fight that he could no longer think of anything else.

"Maybe we actually can make a getaway, how about it, fellows? How many guards do you suppose they have? Two, maybe three—all right, let's say five. They're not so well off for soldiers, let me tell you."

"Yeah, and if the night is real dark. . . . Take a look, Misha, what's the sunset like—any sign of rain?"

And although the sun was setting on a clear

horizon and the first twinkling stars had appeared in the sky, the hope Misha had kindled in their breasts did not disappear.

Night had fallen when they heard the motor of a big truck chug and sputter as it came to a standstill outside the isolator. There was a stamping of feet and the sound of voices, and then a key rattled in the lock. The prisoners became very still.

The hangmen, accustomed to cries of horror, hysterical wailing, swearing and beseeching, stood stock-still in the doorway, frightened by the waitful silence. This silence seemed to have frightened even the chief of the escort, a tall, husky corporal in a black SS uniform, who was in charge of executions in the *Gross-lazaret*. He nervously shouted a savage oath and, snapping on his flashlight, pierced the darkness of the cell with a bright ray of light.

No, apparently there was no danger. The doomed men sat quietly on the floor. The self-confident hangman, for whom the shooting of wounded men had become a military profession, did not perceive the peculiar sparkle in the men's eyes, expressing suppressed excitement rather than hopelessness. He snapped his holster closed and issued a command. The interpreter told the wounded men to go outside

and climb into the back of the Diesel-motored truck, the dark outline of which was vaguely visible in the starlit spring night. Those who lagged behind, or whom feebleness or crippled legs hindered, were seized by the soldiers and swung into the car by their arms and legs, like logs. Misha swung down from the window sill and, without betraying his pain to the enemy, hobbled off on crutches. He made no sound even when the corporal kicked him in the back. At that moment he was counting the enemy's forces. There were seven of them—four soldiers with tommy guns, their commander, the corporal, who had a pistol, and the driver and interpreter, to all appearances unarmed.

When the wounded men were all in the truck the corporal and the interpreter got into the cab and the soldiers perched at the four corners of the truck without even unshouldering their arms. The last minute someone flung a few spades into the truck. They fell with a racket at the feet of the men, their brightly polished, well-worn blades flashing in the moonlight.

Evidently the possibility that the men might resist did not even occur to the hangmen. The car started, drove carefully through the passageway between the barracks and reached the

main driveway. At the gates it was stopped and an elderly, long-nosed soldier counted the passengers. He did it without haste, punctiliously, like a clerk, tired after a day's work sending the last load of cattle to the slaughterhouse. The car started again. The soldiers swaying on the benches kept yawning and dozed off. The only thought they had in their minds, evidently, was to get this last job done as quickly as possible so that they could get back to their barracks and roll into their bunks.

Outside the gates the machine's powerful Diesel motor roared and gained speed. The car sped over the hard, dirt road toward the forest, whose shaggy outline was vaguely visible on the horizon. The fields looked as if bright moondust had been sprinkled on them, and the road stretched like a silver ribbon behind the truck. The air was filled with the smell of grass, young leaves and damp earth.

But the men in the truck were not watching the flashing road, nor did they have time to think of the fact that this was perhaps their last journey. They were exchanging feverish glances. Involuntarily their eyes kept lighting on the spades rattling at their feet. How soon? What were they waiting for? Mustn't let the opportunity slip by.

Misha sat on the floor, his back against the cab. He caught the impatient looks and shook his head. He had decided it was best to wait until they were as far away as possible from the *Grosslazaret*. He wanted to attack the hangmen during the confusion that would inevitably arise when the car stopped. Fervently he hoped to capture at least one tommy gun. Oh! Then he would show them, these foreign hangmen who had become so shameless after their easy murders in Europe; he would show them what a Soviet soldier, even though wounded, even though starved and exhausted, could do.

He was so crazed with the idea of capturing a tommy gun that there was no room for the thought that this was perhaps the last hour of his life. If only none of the men lost control, attacked the enemy before time, upset his plans. And with a savage look Misha stopped those whose hands impatiently stretched toward the spades, clanking and rattling invitingly at each bump.

At last came the smell of pine. Twigs thumped hollowly on the canvas top. The car jerked a couple of times, slowed down and stopped. Stretching their legs and bending over to keep from bumping their heads against the top, the guards began to get up. And then Misha cried

out: "At the swine, boys!" Getting a tight hold on the legs of the German nearest him, he pulled him with terrible strength, and when the latter fell, Misha seized his tommy gun in both hands. What the rest of his comrades were doing then he did not see. When he felt the smooth, cold metal in his hands he mustered all his strength, twisted the tommy gun, and when the German's fingers unclasped, he banged him hard over the head with the butt. Another soldier, his skull split to the eyebrows, was already in the death agony next to him. The redheaded gunner, using his one arm, flung away the spade and grabbed the second tommy gun, and then, light as a cat, jumped out of the car and disappeared into the night. One after another the wounded men climbed out of the truck. From below came the sounds of a struggle, furious shouts and oaths, hollow blows and shooting: the quick reports of pistol shots and the rattle of tommy-gun fire.

Misha, who knew German arms well, sent a long burst right through the canvas covering in the direction of the pistol shots and another, also a long one, in the direction of the tommy-gun fire. Then he crawled to the edge of the truck and swung down, hanging by his arms. He dropped to the ground on his

wounded legs. For an instant the terrible pain made everything swim before his eyes. Realizing that he was losing consciousness, he bit his lip hard. The fog cleared.

Now he could act. Crawling like a lizard Misha reached the huge wheel of the truck, sunk deep in the soft sandy ground. Glancing round the moonlit glade with the practised eye of a soldier, he immediately appraised the situation. The third German lay crushed and motionless near the car, and next to him were two wounded prisoners whom he had probably killed.

Other prisoners were heading for the thick of the forest—singly, in twos and in threes. Two men who were wounded in the arm, were helping along a third. He had put his arms around their necks and was hopping along on his sound leg. The very weak were slung over their comrades' backs. And, from a gaping ditch which Misha guessed had been dug for them, a tommy gun was firing. Apparently the surviving Germans had taken cover in this grave. The lanky infantryman, the one who had been carving his last will and testament on the wall, was firing at them from behind a massive pine stump, aiming at the gun flash.

Misha crawled over to the opposite wheel.

The meadow, overgrown with dry heather and covered with endless rows of neat mounds, lay before him bathed in moonlight. There was no one here now.

"Hey, infantry! How many are there in the grave?" Misha called out.

"You alive? Fine! Three, I think," the infantryman replied and added such a fancy oath that it was clear he felt like a fish in water.

A quivering flame flashed from the grave, and a fan of bullets chirped over Misha's head like a flock of titmice. They waited for the tommy-gun burst to end, then continued their conversation.

"Where's the fourth?"

"The fourth's gotten away, the son of a bitch!"

Five more prisoners, who had been waiting for the firing to end, climbed out of the truck.

"Crawl off in different directions, get away the best you can and keep hidden!" Misha ordered, trying from his position at the wheel to seize a moment when a German would stick his head out of the grave to fire.

But the Germans shot skilfully and well. They had already hit the tire just above Misha's head. The truck leaned over. The bullets kept

hitting the steel rim and pinging off with a wail.

"Get the hell out of the way, you devils," the infantryman cursed from behind his stump.

"Don't climb any trees; they'll have bloodhounds out," Misha called after the men.

Five black spots crossed the meadow, silvered with moonlight. Suddenly Misha heard someone breathing heavily nearby.

"Don't shoot. It's me," came the voice of the artilleryman. He crept up to Misha and smiled guiltily. "I'd made for the woods with my tommy gun, then I heard you fighting, was ashamed, and came back."

Three tommy guns against one tommy gun and a pistol! Now they could really fight. Squatting down in the shelter of the wheel, Misha gave a piercing whistle through his teeth, the universal signal understood by everyone who fought in the ranks of the Soviet army, calling the infantryman from behind his stump. The Germans were not firing. Apparently they were saving their ammunition in case of attack. How many reserve clips could the tommy gunner have?

"We've got to get away before the driver brings help," said the gunner.

"We'll finish off these and go."

"That's not so easy—to finish them off," said Misha. "They're in burrows. Try and get them out. And we can't leave them either. They'll watch and see where we go, then show the way. Listen! I've got an idea."

All aglow with his new idea, as active, energetic people are wont to be when they have an inspiration, he informed his comrades of his plan in a whisper. He and the infantryman would nail the Germans down with their fire while the gunner, who was sounder in body and could move faster, would crawl up to the grave from behind....

...About ten minutes later a short tommy-gun burst from behind the earth hump, a burst after which the silence was so deep that the songs of the nightingales could be heard in the distance, announced that the enemy was done for. From the truck they saw the gunner slip into the grave, fling out both tommy guns, and then climb out and walk upright, to meet his comrades.

"About seventy of our people lying down there. They're still warm."

"Come on, let's go," the infantryman urged. "Climb up on my back, chief."

He slung Misha onto his back and the last three wounded men disappeared in the forest where their comrades had taken cover.

They carried Misha by turns, moving as fast as they possibly could. But they did not get far. Through the ecstatic singing of nightingales, they heard the chugging of motors, then voices and the excited barking of dogs.

"Leave me, comrades, I'll cover your retreat," begged Misha.

His friends did not bother to answer; they continued carrying him almost at a run. Further and further they went into the thickets. Behind them soared the cold lights of flares. Black shadows shifted at the feet of the fugitives. The woods seemed now to melt away, now to rise up with particular solidity. The pursuers were coming closer. The barking of the dogs became ever louder.

"Put me down!" Misha demanded.

"Keep quiet. You're talking nonsense. Quiet," whispered the gunner.

"We'll get away together or we'll die together," said the infantryman who was carrying Misha, tightly clasping his hand in the iron fingers of his own sound one.

But now the voices were so near that they could even make out some of the words. When they passed by an uprooted tree Misha tore himself out of the hands of the man carrying him.

"Stop!"

The authority in his voice made the infantryman stop in his tracks.

"I am an officer and I order you to leave me behind this tree," said Misha. Slipping off his comrade's back, he flattened out on the ground, settled behind the protruding roots, and fired a long burst in the direction of the enemy voices and the barking of the dogs.

"Leave me another tommy gun and run in different directions!" he ordered.

The infantryman and the artilleryman obeyed the order. And for a long time afterwards as they pushed through the thickets of young oak they heard the sounds of battle behind them, tommy-gun bursts, sharp rifle reports, grenade explosions, shouts. Whitish flares, extinguishing the moon, kept soaring into the sky. The reports echoed loudly through the forest and the frightened birds, flapping their wings, flew madly about, bumping into the tops of the birch trees....

The next day, on the square of a village south of Slavuta, in front of the kolkhoz administration building then housing the German *Kommandantur*, villagers saw the body of a young man in the uniform of a Soviet soldier, dangling from the branch of an old beech tree.

The crumpled tunic and trousers of the hanged man were drenched in blood.

The region was already full of rumours about the escape of wounded prisoners, about their extraordinary battle with the fascist guards and about the fact that of all the runaways, only one had been caught. And people knew that this one was the boy with the black beard who was hanging from the beech tree in front of the German *Kommandantur*. People came up, silently looked at the body and saw that not from the noose had the unknown soldier died, but from the many, many wounds on his body, and that he had been hanged by the vengeful executioners when he was already dead.

That night a miracle occurred. Under the very nose of the sentry guarding the *Kommandantur* the body disappeared. It disappeared without a trace, just melted in the warm spring mist. The rising sun shone on the slashed end of the rope. And the next night, at the fork of the roads leading south and southwest from Slavuta, a nameless grave appeared under an old maple tree.

The peasants of the surrounding villages sheltered and tended the runaways. From them they learned what had happened in the *Gross-lazaret*. The story of the heroic exploit of the

unknown soldier lying under the maple tree travelled through the villages and hamlets. . . .

. . . That is all I could learn from the inhabitants of the surrounding villages in those later days when Soviet troops advancing south and southwest passed the maple tree and the nameless grave. I want to place this story of mine, in which nothing has been concealed or exaggerated, among the simple bouquets of our men on the grave of the unknown Soviet soldier who performed such a miracle of comradeship born of battle.



Pan Tyukhin and Pan Teleyev

THERE are autumn days in the Carpathians when the sun shines brightly and the cool air is so transparent that from a height you can see thirty kilometres around, and so clear that it seems you need only reach out a hand to touch the neighbouring hill carpeted with rich forest, fiery red at the base, a glowing gold on the slopes, merging into the emerald green of the summit. Gleaming spider webs drift quietly through azure air. Flocks of cranes pass southward, flying so high over the hilltops that they cannot be seen. Only their throaty calls reach the ear, sounding like the creaking of the long, two-horse carts used in Poland. Everything sparkles in the cool stillness, exuding the soothing, fertile aroma of autumn. Then suddenly a gusty nor'wester comes tearing down, whips

a cold, frosty fog out of some deep valley, drags low clouds over the sky, draws veils of dirty-grey mist across the mountains, and races off to play among the hills, ravines and mountain paths, scattering fine particles of rain and chasing clusters of golden and crimson leaves.

It was a sudden storm of this kind which caught us at the airfield of a small Polish town where we were waiting to take off for a flight over the mountains, across the front to Banská-Bystrica, where the Slovak people had risen against the Germans. Low clouds kept our plane grounded on the concrete runaway. The fog was so thick that you could not see the propeller from the wing tip. And as though mocking us, the airfield radio broadcast reports from partisan headquarters on the course of the uprising and the increase in the area held by the partisans, as well as the fact that thick clouds covered the only landing strip the partisans had in the mountains.

We paced round and round our plane in exasperation, listening to the water splashing down from the wings onto the concrete of the runaway.

It was only Major Bubentsov of the Engineers, in command of the aerodrome, who seemed satisfied with the weather. He was a lean, quick-moving man with a large head and

high forehead, and a lively, wrinkled face from which it would have been difficult to guess his age. His round grey eyes, deep set in dark sockets, and thin, aquiline nose gave him in profile the look of some proud bird of prey. Yet it was clear that he was a good-natured, sociable, energetic fellow.

He kept laughing at our impatience and joking about his being a good friend of the Weather Man, who had promised to keep us there as his guests until at least the following day.

He confessed frankly that here in this remote little Polish town, now far away from the front, he, a Moscovite, was starved for "home talk"—so starved, in fact, that he might die of a stroke or heart failure if he didn't soon talk himself out to someone "from over there." There was such unaffected longing in these last three words that we could not help feeling sorry for him.

The latest report on the weather front said that the clouds had settled on the mountain crests. There was nothing to do but accept the cheerful major's invitation.

As darkness descended in a thickening fog, we climbed into a car made up of "the ten best makes" as the major boasted, i.e., knocked together out of all kinds of wrecked trophies. Its antediluvian horn hooted raucously as it nosed

its way slowly through the fog, along the streets of the completely invisible town. Then, holding hands and feeling our way like blind people, we edged through a small garden whose aroma testified to an abundance of flowers, reached a small house, and on entering found the table ready laid.

Bubentsov in his eagerness to compensate us for having to remain here, spread out the whole of his week's rations. He himself, however, ate nothing; he only talked without stopping. But we had no complaint to make. The dinner was excellent for those days, and the major's talk was so vivid and lively, his expressive, wrinkled face so intelligent and his round eyes so kindly, that it was a pleasure to listen to him.

"You know, comrades," he said, while his small, strong hand traced all kinds of pumps and gears and pinions on a paper napkin with a burnt match, "I'm ashamed to say it, but the thing I dreamed of most as a child was to go abroad. Yes, abroad. We lived on Kaluzhskaya Street, and there was a Moscow football player living in the same house. He played centre forward on a Moscow team and was quite famous at that time. Well, one day he went to play a match in Turkey and brought back a pair of lilac trousers and a straw hat with a cord around it...."

"When he went out in those wonderful trousers, we young lads in our 'teens used to follow him around at a respectful distance. And all this hero-worship wasn't only because he was a famous player, but because he'd been abroad, he'd played in Istanbul. In Istanbul, eh? Funny, isn't it?

"Well, it served me right, later on when I became an engineer I was sent to all the industrial centres of Europe and lived for a time in America. And what do you think was the only thing I brought back with me—apart from technical experience, of course? Homesickness. Nothing but that. I don't mean that sweetish, sentimental homesickness that you get in old novels. Not a bit of it! Just an overwhelming longing that kept me gripped by the throat. And a longing not so much for my native town, native speech, and the family, though that was included of course, but mostly for our way of living, our scale of life, our people. Yes, and even for our difficulties, damn it all—difficulties that make a man out of you. And a longing for our own air that's so good to breathe. And for our sort of people. Believe me, there are no such people abroad—at least not yet."

The major jumped up from the table and began pacing the room, sawing the air with his hand, miraculously missing the furniture.

“Excuse me, I’m keeping you from eating. . . . But you can understand, I’ve got damnably homesick here. Damnably! When you’re home, you know, it all seems just ordinary and everyday; ordinary things are happening and ordinary things are written in the papers. And even—I may as well admit it—sometimes written in a pretty dull way. And we know everyone around us, and sometimes we’re a bit sick of each other, too. But as soon as you’re abroad, you grab any old Soviet newspaper or open a letter and drink it in—all of it—every scrap! Every detail, even the theatre advertisements in the papers or greetings from relatives in a letter. When you’re far away you feel more keenly the magnitude of the job we’re doing back home. And you feel an irresistible yearning to be there and to have a hand in it! Well, what do you say, isn’t it the same with you? There you are, you see! . . . As for our people—there’s no one to contrast them with here at home, but once they get abroad, you can pick them out of any crowd—some particular strength in their faces. . . . But you must be getting tired of watching me marching about; I’ll sit down.”

He did sit down for a moment, tossed into his mouth several spoonfuls of the excellent Polish vermicelli floating in the bouillon together

with curly parsley tips, but the next moment he had dropped his spoon and was pacing up and down again.

"No matter how you mix up our people in a crowd of foreigners, they're sure to stand out. That's the truth. Can't mix them any more than you can mix oil and water. Look how the war has shaken everything up—states, races, political parties. In some places things are so mixed up that you can't make head or tail out of them. But not so with us. However much we've been battered and bent, we've proved able to take it. We've stood the test all right! We're strong metal: flexible, rustless, and gone through such a tempering that nothing can break or batter, crush or twist us! That's the truth. There was an instance here in these parts, for example, that you'd hardly believe. I didn't believe it myself when I first heard it. I never met the chief actors, so to speak, but there are plenty of people about who saw them with their own eyes. All the proof you want. I had lots of time on my hands, so just for something to do I checked up on the story and I found it really happened just as they said. Excuse me for a moment...."

Bubentsov left the room. We heard him knock at some door, then ask in French if he might bring in his friends, Soviet officers, and

introduce them. The reply came in a woman's clear contralto—also in French but with a strong Polish accent: "Certainly, please do, I shall be very glad to meet them!"

"Come along," said Bubentsov, returning. "First of all I'll show you the portraits of the main actors. Come on in, you won't regret it."

We passed through several rooms until we came to one which, judging by the highly polished, very uncomfortable "modern" furniture, was evidently the living room. A tall, athletic-looking girl in skiing pants and a khaki tunic of rough wool was sitting at a low square table under the shade of a large lamp. She was engaged in the rather unfeminine task of taking apart and cleaning a German tommy gun, the scattered parts of which were arranged on a newspaper. She rose and bowed courteously as we entered, hiding her slender hands with long, oil-stained fingers behind her back.

"Panna* Marysia, daughter of the owner of the house. She is a Polish partisan who intends to cross the front beyond the Vistula." Having introduced her, the major asked permission in French to show us the portraits of her friends.

* Panna—Polish for Miss.—*Tr.*

A smile lighted the girl's eyes, making her thin, irregular face attractive. Still holding her hands behind her back, she led us to the wall where old family portraits were hanging in heavy frames.

One photograph showed a very thin young man with sweeping black brows, a prominent, stubborn-looking forehead, thin, firm lips and a clean-cut chin. The face was strong and resolute and very purposeful.

From another one with a similar oval frame, a round-faced lad with a snub nose and high cheekbones looked down at us. His hair was close-cropped, freckles sprinkled his face, and the narrow, mischievous eyes expressed imperturbably good humour.

There were laurel leaves beneath these two portraits—according to the old Polish custom of decking pictures of illustrious ancestors.

It was not difficult to see, however, that these two were not of Polish descent, that they were our Soviet people, and we had the feeling that our fellow countrymen must find it rather dull here among all these gentlemen with long moustachios and ladies with elaborate, nineteenth-century coiffures.

Panna Marysia straightened the laurel leaves, which were somewhat askew, and, indicating the black-browed face, said with

that happy, shy excitement with which a girl mentions her sweetheart:

“That is Pan* Andrei Tyukhin.”

Then, her long lashes barely veiling the affectionately smiling eyes with which one recalls a kind and very jolly friend, she pointed to the snub-nosed face:

“That is Pan Andrei’s friend, Pan Fyodor Teleyev,” and added: “Very good pans, very splendid knights.”

Then her black eyes filled with the same happy excitement as she asked us:

“Pan officers, you know these gentlemen?”

We said that unfortunately we had never met them, apologized for having troubled her, and went out, leaving this strange girl to her masculine job. Beaming with all the innumerable wrinkles that seemed to emphasize every expression of his face, especially his smile, our host asked:

“Well, you heard that? See how our people are honoured? ‘Knights’! They deserve the title all right! But there’s a whole story behind that. I haven’t bored you with my talk?... Then come and have some fruit and wine, and I’ll tell it to you. You won’t find it dull, I swear you won’t.”

* Pan—gentleman, Mr.—*Tr.*

He sat down in an armchair, and one could see from the tired droop of his shoulders that many a year had passed over his head, and those not easy ones.

“Well, you know of course that for reasons beyond your control you’ve got stuck in the very middle of a Polish oil district.” Picking up a pencil and another paper napkin from the table, he resumed his professional habit of tracing the outlines of derricks and oil tanks with exact, rasping strokes. “Didn’t you know that? I’ll explain. The whole of this part of the Carpathians is stippled with oil derricks. It’s not Baku, of course, nor Grozny, nor even Syzran. . . . And to us the equipment we saw here when we arrived looked more fit for a museum—drawing up the oil with buckets! But all the same they did manage to squeeze something out of the ground, and quite a lot, according to their standards. Well, when the Germans invited themselves in here, the first thing they did, of course, was to lay their hands on that oil. They needed oil in the worst way, and they wanted to squeeze all they could out of these antediluvian wells. Settled on them like wasps on a peach.

“Of course, fascist brutality is no new thing to you. You’ve seen it in action. Been at Majdanek? There you are! But all the same you

might call this corner of the map a model exhibition, so to speak, of Hitler's 'new order.' Yes, a model exhibition. I'd like to have excursions brought here from all over the world. I mean it! Educational. Take a look, peoples of the world! See what you would have got if the Soviet Army hadn't saved you from that 'new order.' Very instructive they'd be, excursions like that!

"Take this town here for example. The oil works were nothing to write home about, but the Germans herded people here from all over Europe—French, Belgians, Czechs, Danes, even Liechtensteiners—from places you'd hardly find on the map. And the whole lot lived in camps, behind barbed wire. And the wire was electrified. Went to work under guard, came back under guard, a sixteen-hour day! Food in real fascist style—turnips for first, second and third course. Half a litre of turnip water each time. Three tiers of bunks in the barracks, two cubic metres of air per head. And floggings a-plenty. A regular system of flogging!"

Bubentsov crawled under the bed and brought out a flexible steel rod covered with rubber and having a handle of plastics.

"A heavy thing—they called them '*gummis*.' Each German overseer had one of these *gummis*. They used them to encourage the starving,

exhausted men who could hardly drag their legs to the derricks. Look at the handle. See? 'Erich Bock-Werke. Frankfurt.' Mass production of fascist accessories, so to speak. And the whole time these rods were dancing on the backs of prisoners of war and the Polish workers too, who were taken to work and back under guard the same way. But the *gummi* was the Nazis' stone axe, a primitive thing dating from the early days of fascism. In later years they had a special flogging machine. That's right, you heard me—a flog-ging ma-chine—a machine for automatically flogging people. Hard to credit, isn't it? Take a look at this photo. See—a zinc-covered table—made it easier to wash off the blood. Hygiene, eh? As soon as the victim was on the table, these metal half-hoops, see?—gripped him and held him down. Then a turn of this indicator on the table fixed the number of blows and set that drum with steel rods revolving. The rods would catch on this bar and bend. Then with the revolution of the drum they would be released and whip down on the victim's back. Look closely, you can see the factory name on this plate—'Omega. Dresden.' And there's the factory number. Yes, it was the Omega factory in Dresden that made these flogging machines!

"But that's not all! Fascism didn't invent

only these machines. I don't know how it was in other places, but here German thoroughness had even worked out a whole flogging table. Here it is. You know German? Then you can read the original: 'Second failure to fill the work quota—five blows; third failure—ten.... Damage to tools—fifteen.... Disobedience—fifteen; second offence.... twenty-five.... Talking to the local population—twenty....' In a word, if any Pole, Czech, Belgian or Liechtensteiner, worker or engineer, broke one of these rules, the German overseer would write him out a neat slip—a flogging coupon, so to speak, with a ration of blows. On returning from work the man—yes, the man himself—had to go to the camp offices, and the German on duty to whom he gave the coupon would perform the automatic flogging.

"A man, a living being, the finest thing on earth—one who not long ago had dreamed of the future, studied, been interested in literature and art, had loved—this man would lie down on that table there, gripped by iron hoops, and some German cripple, turned down by all the army commissions, would flog him with that machine. A miracle of fascist technique, eh? And if anyone resisted, or if he was too exhausted to move and work, then he'd find himself in the 'black train' which ran twice a month be-

tween these parts and the famous Oswiecim. There he'd be burned in Birkenau ovens as industrial waste that was of no more use to *Grossdeutschland*. Maybe you don't believe me? Then ask my landlord, Pan Kazimierz. He's a local engineer and the Germans forced him to work for them too. He was on that table twice; the first time he got ten strokes and the second time fifteen for leniency to the workers, and he nearly landed in a Birkenau oven. But he was saved by those two, our fellow countrymen whose portraits are now hanging in the living room along with the highly respected ancestors.

"In a word, this whole fascist system was meant to grind out every human trait—pride, honour, solidarity—to crush people's understanding, destroy their will and turn a man into—not even an animal—a horse can bite to defend itself, a bull can use its horns—into a cheap living machine to be used until there's nothing more to be squeezed out of it, then carted to the rubbish heap, in other words, Oswiecim. And the most horrible thing was that they had already partly accomplished their purpose. Fear of death made people hold their tongues, submit and work. The feeling of protest grew duller, their will power and resistance weakened. That's the truth. Of course this did not apply

to everybody, but to a great many—a great many.

“That’s how it was here, in this preserve of the ‘new order,’ right up to last spring, when quite by chance and in different ways those two men landed here, those two who are still dubbed the Polish way—Pan Andrei Tyukhin and Pan Fyodor Teleyev. Touching how these names stick to them, isn’t it? Actually their names are Andrei Pantyukhin, navigator of a long-distance bomber that crashed, and Fyodor Panteleyev, an oil worker from Grozny, a prisoner of war.

“You’re smiling, I see. It really is funny that they should still be called in the Polish manner here, but do you know, it somehow strikes me as a special way of honouring them for what they did. But that comes later. First of all listen to their story:

“Andrei Pantyukhin came first. It was that same Panna Marysia whom you just met that found him shortly after her father, Pan Kazimierz, an elderly and very respectable gentleman, had been under the flogging machine for the second time—nearly killed him—had to take to his bed. Towards evening Panna Marysia went to the village of Krośnienki for the doctor. Krośnienki is not far from here—in the hills seven kilometres north of the town. The

doctor was an old friend of the family who was working as a labourer on his brother's farm in order to escape being mobilized by the Germans. So off she went, and just where the path turns into the hills, she suddenly heard something like a groan. Yes, a groan.

"What could that be? Well, she's not the timid sort. She turned off the path and saw a half-burnt parachute hanging on a tree and a man lying under it. He was groaning but he didn't move. Must have been unconscious. He was wearing a helmet and an airman's uniform—a pilot. She raised him and turned him over. He came to himself and—grabbed his revolver: 'Get back, or I'll fire.' As Russian and Polish are pretty similar, they soon understood each other. She saw he was in a bad way—leg broken, arm hurt. What could she do? Carry him to the town? She'd have done it, she's a plucky girl, but it would have been of no use—Germans everywhere, and searches every other day. To the farm where the doctor was working? No good either. There was a German division thereabouts undergoing reorganization after having been smashed at Voronezh. All the villages were full of them. Well, the airman found the way out: 'Hide me here in the bushes,' he told her, 'among the rocks; it's summer and I'll lie here until the bone knits.'

“That’s what they did. Panna Marysia burned the parachute, went for her doctor, and they bandaged him and put the leg in splints, all shipshape. And then they took turns bringing him food, he from the farm, she from the town. Well, our lad lived there for one day, two days, a week, and soon he learned the language—evidently had a good head on him, pretty sharp he was. While they were feeding and bandaging him, he’d be asking them questions—how they lived, what the Germans were like, etc. They told him all about the ‘new order’ and the *gummis* and the flogging machine and the smoke of Birkenau that stank of human flesh. And he would flare up: ‘Why the devil do you stand those swine?’ And she would answer: ‘But what can you do if you’re taken to the Birkenau ovens for disobedience?’ And he came right back: ‘Better die fighting than let them use you like cattle.’ In fact, he lost his temper: ‘Have the Polish people lost all their grit?’ ‘All the brave ones have been taken to Oswiecim,’ she said. ‘All our best fighters, all those who belonged to the Workers’ Party—the Gestapo has taken them all. Birkenau is smoking day and night.’ But he came back with: ‘Then it’s high time to act before they take the last of them, or you’ll all find yourselves in that damned oven.’ In a word, he drove the little

Panna to tears. She was offended and went away without even saying goodbye.

"But on the way she cooled down and began thinking that the Russian was right. Then she tried to figure which of the plucky ones had remained alive after the underground organization was smashed. There were not many people she knew in the town, but she remembered some of her old school friends and the workers who visited her father. And she decided to start things moving at once. Talked to this one, talked to that one. Saw that there really were some brave people left. And how brave! Ready to start at once. Only they all asked: who's going to lead us? Well, without a second thought she said: 'The underground partisan centre.' 'What centre?' She didn't lose her head: once you're lying, go the whole hog. 'The Workers' Party, they've got the centre going again.' At that time the Polish Communists really were developing the resistance movement all over the country; only in this town their organization had not yet been restored. Well, people believed her, listened, plucked up courage, and began to act. First of all the German office at the oil wells was burned down. That set things going. As soon as that office went up in smoke, folks began to raise their heads. . . . 'Yes,' they said to themselves, 'Po-

land's carrying on.' And they straightened their backs.

"All the time Andrei kept telling Marysia to do this and that. Told her to form an organization of small groups, and that the people in the different groups shouldn't know each other, but communicate through organizers. He told them how to go about it all, and where to deal their blows. He had a head on him all right! Soon he got a clear idea of everything from Marysia, learned all about the town and dove right into the job. To make a long story short, a whole underground organization was formed. And the work went on. Here a petrol train was blown to bits, there a derrick burned down, or a train went plunging down the wrong track. And all the time Andrei was lying in a cave, with splints on, helpless and powerless to move, but with his head working and his will like cold steel. It was he who kept all that secret machinery moving like clockwork, with Panna Marysia the main spring.

"Well, soon the people here had their chins well up. They set up a workshop in the former high school, in the physics class, and made bombs and fire bottles. Some of the folks had weapons hidden—they collected them and gave them to the fighters. The Germans began to suffer some serious losses. And the thing was,

they couldn't make out where it was all coming from.

"But there was one thing Pantyukhin couldn't manage. Try as he might, his people couldn't get in touch with the prisoners of war and foreigners working at the oil wells. Yes, that was the toughest job. They were kept under very strict guard. And the prisoners were scared of those Birkenau ovens. But then the second act was played—you just listen. When the next group came from Silesia, from the slave market in Kreuzburg, a new prisoner of war arrived at the wells—that same Grozny oil worker, Fyodor Panteleyev. In general, it was strictly forbidden to bring Red Army prisoners here, but an exception had been made in respect to Panteleyev because he was a highly skilled oil worker.

"He began by telling the fascist boss that by using his own methods he'd drill wells twice as quick as they'd been drilled before, and demanded a brigade of Czechs—it would be easier for him to make himself understood with Slavs, he told them. That's what he said. And began drilling. Well, of course you know that among the prisoners our men had a reputation for being the most intractable. And now here was a man really putting his heart into work for the Germans. He started boring, and he

actually did reach oil in a very short time. You can guess that the prisoners from other countries began giving him some rather queer looks—how were they to understand it? Was it possible that there were fascist lackeys among the Russians too? And to cap it all, the Germans noticed him at once and began to favour him, treat him better. But somehow the derrick Fyodor Panteleyev had constructed caught fire in three days, and burned down so neatly that it blocked the well. Just that. In a word, start the job all over again.

“Then the prisoners, the ones with heads on them, began giving him different looks. But he just went on working. And merry as you please, feeling right at home. Laughing, singing songs. Got hold of an accordion somewhere and played it. He wangled an easier regime for his Czechs, too. So they started the second derrick. Things went along so well they expected to reach oil any moment. The Germans were delighted—the man was a gold mine. The prisoners kept quiet and waited to see what would happen. And then suddenly—news that the autumn floods had somehow seeped through the dam right in that spot, flooding the whole valley, sweeping everything away as clean as though it had been licked up, so that even the Russian and his Czechs had

a narrow escape. And again the Germans made much of him—*ach, ach, wie schade, pfui*, such a misfortune! He must have been a slick one, somehow or other he managed to fix everything so that with all their suspicions, all their network of spies, the Germans never saw through him. They thought he was an efficient fellow, a master at his job. He had the right of entry into all the barracks in order to choose men for his brigade. Yes, they even wrote him a pass themselves.

“This was when our Panteleyev really began to work. Some of the prisoners had already got an inkling of what he was up to and were ready to meet him halfway. But he had the eye of a sniper. Knew how to take a man’s measure, sound the doubtful ones, see through the traitors and avoid them. And little by little he got together an organization. Just think—there in the prisoners’ barracks, behind electrified barbed wire! And the way he did it! Had his own man in every barrack. How he managed to come to an understanding with them beats me. They say he knew no language but Russian. But they wrote leaflets in all languages—‘hand-on leaflets’—read and hand them on. And little by little he and his friends began preparing for an uprising. . . . That’s right—an uprising.

“There’s some kind of chemical substance, a single drop of which will set a whole barrel of liquid to boiling. Well, that Soviet lad was like that. They say he was a jolly fellow, looked as though he hadn’t a care in the world—always ready to dance and sing and grin—but under it all he must have had the brain of a statesman. He realized that an uprising without the Poles, without support from the local people, would come to nothing. And so he began feeling out the Polish workers. But they were suspicious—afraid of provocateurs. And for that matter, what chance had he to get in touch with them, with all that electrified barbed wire and sentries posted on towers with machine guns?

“But the prisoners were getting impatient. The underground organization, leaflets, talk—it had raised their hopes, set their brains working, stiffened up their will. Their self-respect had awakened. And they were living a hell of a life. Panteleyev began to be afraid there might be some spontaneous uprising, they might fling themselves against all the tommy guns and barbed wire. So he decided to take the bull by the horns—do or die.

“Suddenly he fell ill—some queer kind of illness. He reckoned on the Germans regarding him as a man they needed badly. There was no

hospital in the camp; the only medical service was rendered by a man not much better than an assistant vet. They'd be sure to take him out to the town hospital, he thought. And that's just what happened. They took him to the Polish hospital. With a guard, of course. But what did that matter?

"Later on Panteleyev was asked how he had found out there was a resistance organization beyond the wires, and why he had decided to contact it? 'The Poles are a proud people,' he said, 'and I could see how they were treated. It was impossible that they had not organized.' His idea was that when they heard there was a Russian prisoner in the hospital, the organization would certainly try to contact the camp through him. And again it came off just as he had foreseen. One of the doctors in the hospital was a member of the organization. She told her group leader that there was a Russian prisoner in the hospital, he passed it on to Marysia, she to Andrei, who sent the word back: sound him out.

"Well, Panteleyev's illness dragged on. The conspirators of the two groups kept circling round each other, sniffing warily, and found they had the same aims. So they began to talk openly, and agreed to joint action on the morning of the fifteenth of July, when the pris-

oners would be taken from the barracks to the bathhouse and would meet the column of Polish workers being marched to work under guard.

“The conspirators planned it all out, down to the smallest detail—how they’d have weapons ready, how the telegraph station and telephone exchange were to be put out of order, how they’d block the police barracks—in a word, everything. And in all these talks neither conspirator revealed anything about himself. Panteleyev pretended to have been sent by some imaginary Czech Communist, and as for Pantyukhin, he remained in the background—he just wasn’t there—it was the underground organization working. Thus they brought the two ends of their respective organizations into contact, neither of them suspecting that at the head of the other organization stood a Soviet citizen like himself.

“After this Panteleyev recovered at once, and was taken back to camp to drill wells and prepare the uprising. And Pantyukhin, tended by his Polish friends, got onto his feet at the same time. The bone of his leg had knit and the splints were off; true, his arm was still bandaged, but he could walk without crutches, using only a stick. When his strength first came back, he wanted to go meet the Soviet Army. By that

time, too, there was a love affair beginning between him and that same Panna Marysia. Don't think it was just a passing romance, an affair of the moment. No, it was the real thing, born of the common struggle. She had decided to go with him; she knew that a Polish army was being organized in our country, and she wanted, as she says, to get through to her troops. But they didn't go, and here's why. It was a very big thing he had started here, and he felt he hadn't the right to drop it before it was finished. You can see that. How could he, when he had roused the people and formed a strong organization. How could he leave it? So he stayed on in the forest, in a lean-to among the rocks, where nobody knew of him, nobody ever saw him, and went on directing everything through Panna Marysia.

“Then something else happened. Old Pan Kazimierz, Panna Marysia's father, and several Polish workers and engineers were arrested for participating in the resistance. They were threatened with the Birkenau ovens. They were good men—folks thought a lot of them, and the whole organization was sending messages through the group leaders that they had to be saved. Pantyukhin began to be afraid of a spontaneous uprising, without proper preparation, and that would ruin everything.

“Then came the fifteenth of July. Well, it couldn’t have come off better—like men boring a tunnel from opposite sides of a mountain, everything reckoned to a hair so that though they can’t see each other, they meet at the exact spot designated. And it showed what the ability to organize can do—the greatest force on earth, and one especially characteristic of us Soviet people.

“When the two columns met at the time planned, they fell upon the guards with such a sudden, concerted attack—some with cobblestones, others with grenades—that they killed twelve Germans, with only one of their own wounded. That was Panna Marysia. And they only managed to hurt her because when she suddenly saw the German who had flogged her father, all orders flew out of her head and she rushed straight at him. In a word, twelve to one! Yes, that was the proportion. . . . Then the columns joined forces and made a dash for the wood pile where weapons were hidden, armed themselves, locked the offices, released the prisoners, burned down the police barracks and the empty military barracks—the soldiers had run away without even having time to telephone the neighbouring villages for help—burned the oil tanks and the refinery, and then made off to the mountains, taking food and ammunition with them.

“There was a rather funny incident during the uprising. The Czechs who’d been working with Panteleyev at the borings—picked daredevils, ready for anything—well, they got hold of the German manager of the works, dragged him to the flogging machine, threw him down on the table and set the thing going, but, perhaps because they didn’t understand the mechanism, they didn’t set the number of strokes, so the machine went on working until the steel rods had turned Herr Chef into a beefsteak. Yes, a bloody beefsteak. Or rather minced pork.

“Well, that’s not important—just a minor detail. What mattered was that everything went so slick that when German reinforcements arrived from a neighbouring garrison there was nobody to fight. The insurgents had disappeared without a trace. They were away in the mountains. The only thing left for the punitive detachment to do was put out the fires in the storehouses and clear the railway tracks of ammunition trains that had been blown up.

“It was then that Andrei Pantyukhin and Fyodor Panteleyev met for the first time, there in the mountains. Panna Marysia told me that when they learned they were fellow countrymen to whom the local folks had given Polish

names, and that they had been carefully misleading each other about their identity while working underground, they laughed till they could only roll helplessly on the grass in the forest glade. From that time on they were firm friends and for over a year, till the Soviet Army came, they operated very effectively here in the mountains with their international column, with the Young Communist League member Fyodor Panteleyev as commander, and the Communist Andrei Pantyukhin as commissar, or, as he modestly called himself in the local style, officer in charge of education.

“You want to know how it all ended—that is, if you can call it an end? Listen, and I’ll tell you.

“When our units approached these parts—the Carpathian foothills—and there was heavy fighting at the Dukla Pass, one of our cavalry brigades stumbled on an enemy ambush and found itself in a tight spot. They dismounted and began fighting on foot. Suddenly they heard firing somewhere in the enemy rear. The general and his chief of staff stared at each other in bewilderment. Where could help be coming from? Nothing like this had been included in the plan of battle. But the firing kept getting louder. Then suddenly a ‘hurrah’ burst from somewhere on the other side of the valley.

What on earth? Our forces must have got round there, then? The general ordered the artillery to give the Germans all they had, and his men to mount and attack. After this pounding from both sides, the Germans just caved in. When the fighting was over, armed men in civilian clothes came out of the forest. Marched up to the general and reported themselves according to regulations: 'Lieutenant Andrei Pantyukhin, and Sergeant Major Fyodor Panteleyev, reporting for service with an international column of 250 men, 20 machine guns and 10 mortars of German make.'

"And that's all. Yes, that's all, nothing more of any interest."

The major jumped up, poured himself a glass of wine and, raising it, said solemnly:

"To the man who cannot be broken, crushed or bent. To the Soviet man!"

He drained the large glassful at a draught and smiled with all his wrinkles radiating in merry lines from his round, unwinking, falcon's eyes.

"Any questions?"

"What about the romance? How did the affair between Andrei and Panna Marysia end?" we asked.

"I knew you'd ask that. It didn't end—it's still going on. You heard me—still going on. Of

course it's rather complicated. They're very different. Different upbringing, different views, a different approach to life. In these parts Pan Andrei Tyukhin was famed as a hero of heroes, worthy of honour, glory, and—a good rest. Anyhow, that was what Panna Marysia thought. She's a good, brave girl, and she learned a lot in the underground organization, but all her upbringing led her to think that way. Well, and our Andrei was just an ordinary Soviet fellow, in no way a hero from his point of view. He'd just fought the best he could. It's true that when H.Q. heard of his mishap and his exploits, he was offered a furlough, but he wouldn't hear of it. As soon as he and his column broke out of encirclement, he applied for frontline service, only not as navigator, but with paratroops, since he'd learned partisan fighting. So he was sent there. He loved the girl, but there was no moving him.

“They parted coldly, almost with hostility. He was an inflexible fellow—wouldn't listen to any woman's talk, even for the look of the thing. Well, Marysia couldn't understand him at first, how a man who'd earned his rest and been given a furlough could be so anxious to leave his sweetheart and go off to fight. She was hurt, and even insulted. But later she came

to understand. One day she came to me—I was already billeted here with them. ‘Pan Engineer,’ she says, ‘I want to be worthy of him, I want to fight too, like Pan Andrei, until my country is free.’ And what do you think? She went to Lublin, got in touch with the Polish headquarters and applied to fly to the Polish partisans beyond the Vistula as a radio operator. She’s training now, learning about weapons, studying codes and Morse.”

The engineer fell silent, staring at the window where the thick blanket of fog shut out everything.

“And that’s the story of the two Soviet fighting men whom in these parts they still refer to respectfully as Pan Tyukhin and Pan Teleyev.”



A Compatriot

I WAS detained by business that day at the partisan *velitelstvo*, the poetic Slovak name for the rebel headquarters situated in the Town Hall, a building in Hungarian Gothic style. It was late at night by the time I started for my hotel. The dark, clean, narrow streets of Banská-Bystrica, a remarkably beautiful mountain resort which the fortunes of war had turned into the centre of the Slovak rebellion, were completely deserted at this hour. The hubbub of voices, the chugging of motorcycles, the bustle of army cars, the entire restless, romantic tumult which gave the town the rugged appearance of a bivouac, had ebbed with the advent of darkness. Only the infrequent, rather too lusty shouts of the rebel patrols and the sweet slow strains of violins and accordions filtering through the blacked-out windows of little restaurants and cafés broke

the silence of the town, which seemed infinitely peaceful now.

The foreign, waning moon, which had risen very bright from behind the undulating crests of the wooded mountains, wrapped the gabled roofs in a transparent haze of cold, indifferent light. A damp, gusty wind, laden with the rich odours of the mountain autumn, whistled through the narrow winding streets, as through the chimney of a samovar. It strewn the clinker-paved streets with the jagged gold of maple leaves, and sent overripe chestnuts clattering down from the trees to the flagstone sidewalk, giving you the feeling that someone was throwing stones at you. On this clear, uneasy autumn night everything seemed to emphasize the fact that you were in foreign parts, in an alien city, torn away not only from your own land, but also from your own army, your own people, the people you were used to. In the daytime you hardly felt it. The small insurgent island encircled by attacking German troops led a very strenuous military life. Inspired by the successes of the advancing Soviet Army, the valiant Slovak people had rebelled against the occupationists and were now fighting furiously, beating back the German troops pressing them on all sides.

This atmosphere of fierce, selfless struggle was similar to that in which we lived during the war. But at night, when everything quietened down and the rebel capital was sunk in peaceful slumber, entrusting its safety to the partisan patrols, who decorated their rifles with lime leaves and spent their time light-heartedly chatting with girls in dark side streets, then a feeling of loneliness, a longing for your native land and dear ones overwhelmed you, crowding out all other thoughts.

Whenever the patrols caught sight of a man in Soviet uniform they sprang away from their girls and, grinning from ear to ear, presented arms with a flourish. The infrequent passers-by would lift their hats respectfully and wish you a "good night." Some would rap out briskly: *Nazdar Ruděj Armadě!* ("Long live the Red Army!"). And four short, stocky peasants in embroidered shirts and hats and carrying hatchet canes (they had probably come down from the mountains to report at the volunteer recruiting centre) stopped when they met me, a Soviet officer, put their arms round each other's shoulders and, by way of greeting, began to chant endlessly:

"Sta-lin, Sta-lin, Sta-lin!"

For a long time this beloved name echoed

through the streets of the hushed town that cool night.

Suddenly someone called out from behind, not very loudly and in perfect Russian:

"Comrade Major!"

I started. I was overjoyed to hear my native tongue. Overjoyed, yet I did not turn around. Who could it be? A Whiteguard emigré would not use that form of address. There were only a few Soviet officers here and I knew their voices well. Then who could it possibly be?

The footsteps behind me rang out crisp and clear. There was no mistaking that they were the footsteps of a military man.

Should I answer or not? The rebel capital, and such a carefree one at night, no doubt teemed with German spies. This might be a trap. No, it was best to wait, not to turn around or reply until I reached a more peopled spot. I increased my pace. The stranger kept up with me but did not overtake me.

"Comrade Major, one minute, please," the voice sounded hurt, imploring, and full of hope.

Surely a saboteur would not talk like that.

I stopped. Before me stood a sturdily-built man, rather less than average height, wearing

the uniform of a Soviet Army senior sergeant. However, instead of the Soviet star, two ribbons were crossed on his cap—a red ribbon and a striped one, the colours of the Czechoslovak flag.

He was armed in an extremely picturesque manner. A German tommy gun hung round his neck like a saxophone; a heavy par-
abellum in a hard leather holster swung from his side, while suspended from his belt, which girdled his tunic snugly and smartly, were Italian grenades—*samovars* we called them. The handle of a dagger protruded from his brightly polished boots.

Sometimes our partisans were armed in such a manner. But what would a Soviet partisan be doing here, in the heart of the Carpathians, far from his native land?

“Permit me to address you, Comrade Major. Senior Sergeant of the Red Army Konstantin Gorelkin, at present, as you see,” smiling good-naturedly he passed his hand over his collection of arms, “at present a Czechoslovak partisan. . . .”

He clasped my hand firmly in his own small, but very strong one.

“Excuse me for stopping you here in the street. I haven’t been home for two and a half years; I’m so homesick I can’t stand it any

longer. When I saw a countryman wearing our own uniform in the *velitelstvo* today, my heart began to beat fit to burst. I almost approached you then and there. Believe me, I could hardly restrain myself."

He was silent for a moment, clearly moved.

"But I couldn't hold out, I watched for you and caught up with you. If you think I'd better go away, say so and I'll go."

By now I realized that he was most likely one of those Soviet persons whom the war, mobilization, or captivity had cast adrift in foreign lands where they were continuing the fight. Our Slovak friends told us with gratitude of several such partisan detachments made up of Soviet war prisoners who gave them a lot of help, fought fiercely, ably, and very staunchly.

This man's fine, honest face, his perfect Russian, and quick manner of speaking, a manner common to my native Kalinin, proved that he was certainly a compatriot. But in alien parts, especially in a rebel district, caution is the law, so I coldly asked him who he was, where he lived, what he had been doing before the war, how he had landed in these parts, and what he wanted of me. He replied without the least sign of hesitation:

"Before I joined the army I lived in Kalinin; had a job as assistant foreman at the *Proletarka* weaving mill. I lived on the factory grounds, in Barrack No. 70, on the third floor, in the *glagolchik*."

"What did the workers call your barracks?" I asked, hardly able to contain my joy, because here, in a foreign town, I had, it seemed, not only met a compatriot but a man from my home town. He had said: "*glagolchik*." This was what the Kalinin textile workers—and they alone—called the little side halls of their dormitories, and no spy, no matter how well trained, could possibly have learned or memorized so specific a term.

"Our barrack was called 'Paris,'" he answered, a little surprised.

"Who was Gorokhov? You must have known Nikolai Gorokhov."

"He was director of the Plekhanov Factory Vocational School. I went to that school, and graduated from it," he was speaking very low now. "I have a Party card, look."

Now I could let myself go, stop being secretive and burst out laughing. Beyond doubt, he was the person he claimed to be. I had grown up on the grounds of the *Proletarka* mill and knew every nook and cranny there.

From his Party card, a queer-looking Party card only the first page of which was preserved, pasted in a hard leather cover, the same face, only a very young and round one, gazed up at me. Even the signature of the district committee secretary was familiar to me.

To think under what unlikely circumstances one may meet a person from home in war!

In this foreign, deserted street we embraced, two men from Kalinin, two Soviet people, blown here by diverse winds of war. He suggested having supper together. Without more ado we entered a quaint little restaurant, the "Golden Ram," which affected the style of a country inn. My journalistic sixth sense told me that this fellow from the *Proletarka* had an unusual story to tell. As for him, after knocking about so long he had met a person from *over there*—from his very home town in fact, and he avidly drank in the sounds of his native tongue and was burning to "unbosom himself."

The people in the little restaurant consisted mostly of sun-tanned partisans in civilian clothes with tri-coloured ribbons in their hats and rifles leaning against their tables; insurgents in dashing uniforms, only recently so despised, now again respected and loved by

the people; the girls accompanying these men, some in military uniform and some in native costume. When they saw two men in Soviet uniform enter, they all jumped up and shouted toasts, scanning the words "Red Army"—"Rudá Armáda." Then the musicians sprang down from their platform, formed a semicircle round the alcove where we had installed ourselves and struck up *Katyusha*, and everybody present began to sing this song of ours in Russian, distorting the words unmercifully.

"What a welcome they gave us!" I said, when we finally managed to settle down at our table.

"You think they are the only ones? Or only here? It's like this everywhere, in all countries. The name 'Red Army' is world-famous now. It is understood everywhere—no need to translate. A magic wand. It feeds us, shelters us, hides us, saves us from pursuit everywhere."

"So you've been in other countries too?"

He merely whistled and waved his hand, as if he had been asked something that went without saying.

"I've been knocking about for over two years. You have no idea how sick I am of it all. At times I get so homesick I feel like diving

off a cliff. The people are fine. The countries too—but there's none can compare with our own Soviet Land!"

He drained a litre mug of beer in one gulp and asked me if I had any Russian cigarettes. He was sorry to hear I had not. All of a sudden he pushed his thick, dark chestnut hair off his forehead, revealing blue radial scars there.

"See?... Wounded in August 1941, near Smolensk. Scratched the skull, but luckily didn't touch the brain. But I lost a lot of blood. Fainted, and when I came to there were none of our men left at my observation post—I was an artillery observer. Germans all around. *Hände hoch!* They took me. Those who were badly wounded they just finished off, but they took me along. I could walk. They formed us into a transportation column and drove us west. Leg power. And from that day on I've been roaming the wide world. Have you time to spare? An hour or two, eh? I'm dying to tell one of my own countrymen all I've lived through, all the things I've seen during this time. Will you listen? Hey, there, comrade, two more mugs!"

And here, in this little restaurant, accompanied by the strains of an orchestra playing slow, melodious but foreign songs, Gorelkin

told me his story, the remarkable story of a Soviet soldier who was taken prisoner and carried off to distant parts, but who even there, thousands of kilometres away from his army, did not consider himself vanquished, did not lay down arms or cease fighting.

I will omit from his tale well-known details about how the fascists treated war prisoners, how the columns of pedestrians petered out as hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of sick, wounded, and exhausted were shot down or clubbed to death by the guards; about the horrors in the camps where every effort was made to turn men into beasts, into famished work horses, unthinking, weak-willed, ready to perform any job dumbly and submissively. I shall give you only the main points of his tale, for otherwise this would have to be a novel, and not a story.

Gorelkin managed to survive, to withstand all the hardships of captivity, and to preserve his energy and will power.

The prisoners were sorted at a camp in Belostok. The group to which Gorelkin was assigned was put in a boxcar and taken south through Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. One of the prisoners in the car was a teacher of geography who spoke German tol-

erably well. The old Austrian guard, a veteran of the last war who secretly hated Hitler, accidentally let it be known that the prisoners were being transported to Greece to work on construction jobs in the port of Salonica which the Germans were then fortifying, adapting it to their military needs.

The woeful train with machine guns mounted on platforms and a carful of armed guards slowly made its way across Europe. It was strictly guarded. Whenever it stopped, tommy gunners surrounded it. To attempt escape under such conditions meant certain death, and yet at every long stop, prisoners tried to escape. They jumped to their death straight onto the barrels of tommy guns. It is unlikely that any of them seriously hoped to get away. Attempting escape was simply one way of committing suicide. These tormented people preferred death to slavery.

Gorelkin and his friends did not want to die. He had become particularly attached to three of the men in the car: Vasil Kopyto, a miner from the Donbas; Semyon Agafonov, an electrician who used to work at a Ryazan power station; and Vladimir Tkachenko, a Moscow schoolteacher. They wanted to live and to fight. They dreamed of escaping, but

of escaping skilfully, safely, and returning to the Army.

The plan for escape was drawn up by Vasil Kopyto, a man remarkable for his inexhaustible cheer and enormous physical strength. It was a very simple plan. One slushy rainy night, as the train crawled along over the mountains of Greece, its wheels scraping and brakes grinding round the curves, the friends pulled up some of the floor boards in their car. Glancing through the breach, they saw the white stones between the ties merging into a single pale ribbon. Then the men slowly lowered themselves; when the toes of their shoes touched the ground they let go and dropped face downward. Bearing the pain of the knocks, they lay in the roadbed until the train had rumbled past over them. A drizzling rain fell interminably through the fog which clung to the bare grey rocks. It was so dark you couldn't see your own hand at arm's length. Of the seven who took the jump, three were cut to pieces by the wheels.

But who prized the life of a prisoner, of a slave?

When the roar of the train had died away in the gorges Gorelkin, Kopyto, Agafonov and Tkachenko, who had escaped with a few bruises, carried the remains of the dead to

the bushes and then struck northwards along the first mountain path. At first they decided to take the shortest route from Greece through the Italian-occupied regions of Albania to Yugoslavia, the news of whose heroic struggle had penetrated even the barbed wire of concentration camps.

Where did they get food? How did they manage to make themselves understood in foreign, distant Greece?

A broad smile spread over Gorelkin's sun-tanned face and two rows of splendid white teeth seemed to light it up making him look younger, more distinguished and intellectual.

"I told you, Comrade Major. Our password was 'Red Army,' everybody understands that everywhere, believe it or not. We would sneak up to a village and knock at the first house and wait. An angry foreign fellow would come out onto the doorstep, wouldn't even want to listen; he'd just wave us off saying: Italiano! Italiano! Meaning—there are lots of your kind prowling about here and the Italians will hang us for the likes of you. And we'd point a finger at our chests and say: 'Red Army! Soviets!' And right away his tone would change. The fellow would look around him, pull us into the hall, feed us, and give us

stuff to take along; and sometimes, if things were quiet in the village, no occupationists around, he'd even let us stay overnight. It was the same everywhere. That's how we got along."

While still in the train they had agreed among themselves to keep to a straight road through the Balkans, Central Europe, Poland, and the Ukraine until they reached the Soviet Army. They figured they'd do it in six months. But the road home for these four Soviet soldiers turned out to be neither so short nor so easy.

Following mountain paths through sparsely populated regions in Albania, they almost reached the shores of Lake Scutari. They could already see it from the mountains, an enormous mirror sparkling on the horizon with wisps of mist floating above it. But suddenly their way was barred by a huge herd of cattle on the road.

Later they discovered that the Italians were driving the cattle confiscated from mountaineers to the port of Durazzo, from where they were to be shipped to Germany. A group of dark-skinned, barefooted women were running after the grey, straight-horned Albanian oxen and the skinny, dusty, sorry-looking cows, piteously lowing with hunger and fa-

tique. The women were weeping and wailing and would not leave the herd. Italian soldiers, swarthy fellows in shorts and tasselled trench caps, lashed the women and the cows indiscriminately with their whips. There were not many of these guards. They felt quite safe, however, and they straggled along behind the herd, smoking and making frequent trips to the wagon carrying a big carpet-covered barrel of wine. And it was here that the event which altered and greatly lengthened the road of the four Soviet soldiers took place.

They had hidden in the wayside bushes to wait there quietly until the cattle passed. But the way the Italians treated these thin, wizened, barefoot Albanian peasant women enraged them so that they attacked the guards (by this time they had already obtained arms for themselves). They shot down three men on the spot. The rest fled to the hills without even trying to put up a fight.

Then Kopyto, who was the "foreign minister," as he styled himself, and maintained connections with the local population, made a speech to the women. He told them in the purest Russian that they could take their cattle, delivered from the hands of fascism by these glorious troops. But the women who had been frightened by the shooting and could not make

out what had happened, lay there in the dusty grass, protecting their heads with their arms. Realizing that the women did not understand him, Kopyto took a stick and began to chase the cattle off the road, certain that the animals would find their own way home. The herd broke up and, sensing what was wanted of them, the oxen and cows turned back, lazily nibbling the grass as they went.

Just then tall, strongly-built men in picturesque dress and carrying ancient muzzle-loaders suddenly appeared on the road. They were Albanian partisans who were out to recapture the herd. When they saw that their work had already been done for them they began to shake the hands of the valiant foreigners, and when they learned, through the same universal word "Red Army," whom they were dealing with, they were deeply moved and carried their friends off to the mountains with them, to the stone fortress-huts scattered among the cliffs where this impoverished, hard-working, courageous people dwelt.

An incessant and fierce struggle was in progress in Albania, which the Axis countries had long ago put down on their lists as vanquished. Without ever meaning to, the four Soviet soldiers joined this struggle, and, interrupting their journey home, set about helping

the mountaineers lend their detachments the organization of military units. Somehow it came about of itself that they began to lead the sallies against Italian transports; they helped organize the longshoreman's hunger strike in the port of Durazzo and the famous raid against Tirana.

They did not know the language. But in war a man is not judged by his words. Soon they had many friends in this little country. They themselves came to love these recklessly brave, helplessly unorganized people, and embraced their cause. But the radio brought them echoes of the great battles being fought on their native soil. Their homeland imperiously called them. So one day they resolutely bid the Albanian partisans farewell. Their new friends equipped them with everything they might need on their difficult journey and saw them to the frontiers of Greece.

This time, after a long discussion, they decided to make their way to Bulgaria. While this would lengthen their journey in distance, the fugitives hoped to curtail it considerably in time. Their plan was to get to Bulgaria, surrender to the frontier guards, be interned, and then to demand through the consulate that they be sent home. Naive dreams! Gorelkin himself could not restrain a smile as he remembered

them. Europe, imprisoned by Hitler, seethed and bubbled like an icebound river straining to break its bonds in spring. In Bulgaria, which they expected to find a peaceful country far away from all the fronts, a struggle—even fiercer than the one in Albania—was in progress. And again the energy of the four Soviet soldiers would not let them pass by indifferent.

One day they came across a partisan detachment besieging the fascist garrison at a small station. They helped the partisans rout the fascists. The fighting experience of the Soviet soldiers stood the Bulgarian comrades in good stead, while the Bulgarians' traditional love for the Russian people quickly advanced the four friends to high positions among the partisans.

Before long Konstantin Gorelkin was already in command of a large partisan unit—the Christo Botev group. His three friends fought in his group and earned the respect of the partisans and the population. All summer and almost all winter the group, which later expanded into a detachment, fought with success in the mountains of the Planinas. The fame of the four brave Russians spread far and wide over the hills and valleys of Bulgaria. This detachment gave the Germans plenty of trouble. Bul-

garian young people called up to the fascist army ran away and joined the detachment. Finally, at the insistence of the German Ambassador in Sofia, the Bulgarian army command sent regular troops into the mountains to destroy the renowned partisan detachment of Communists.

Following the plan drawn up by German instructors, these units took up positions in the mountain passes, encircled the detachment in the mountains and pushed it up into the snowy regions. This was a diabolical plan. Now the partisans could not make a move without leaving tracks. The punitive units followed these tracks, tightening the ring all the time, blocking the mountain passes and setting up barriers of fire in the forests and gorges.

Cut off from the villages, from food and ammunition bases, exhausted by constant battles with an enemy vastly superior in number and in arms, the Christo Botev detachment fought back desperately, its numbers steadily dwindling in the unequal struggle. The partisans began to suffer from starvation and scurvy, their teeth loosened and fell out, they became swollen with mountain fever. There were many wounded, and many who were too weak to walk. When on the march, about one-third of them had to be carried or pulled on sleds.

Those who fell behind, lost their way or tried to hide in the forests till danger was past were caught by local fascists and put to a horrible death. Living people were nailed to wooden stretchers and carried from one mountain village to another for exhibition in the market places, at churches and other public places as a warning to the population. For weeks the heads of executed partisans were publicly displayed on poles. Whenever they succeeded in catching girl partisans alive, the fascists impaled them.

Konstantin Gorelkin knew what fate lay in store for anyone who dropped behind. He knew that no mercy would be shown a single soul. Together with his Russian friends, Bulgarian Communists and workers from tobacco factories, he maintained solidarity, discipline and a fighting spirit in the detachment. They fought their way northwest, pursued by the fascist units as a wounded beast is pursued by the hounds. At Gorelkin's suggestion the officers of the detachment decided that it would fight its way into Yugoslavia and join the People's Army there.

That was an incredible march. Towards the end people began coming down with typhus. The sick men, delirious, their faces flushed and unshaven, a wild glitter in their deep-sunken

eyes, staggered forward on unsteady legs, supported by comrades who carried their weapons. But no sooner did a shot ring out or was a command issued than these same people, who only a minute ago had been raving about food, their families, the heat of the summer, would come to themselves, seize their arms and repulse the enemy attack.

And they accomplished the impossible. These people, exhausted, almost weaponless, half of whom could hardly stand on their feet, pushed through all the way to the Macedonian mountains. The Yugoslavian border was already visible. Gorelkin lined up all the detachment's fighting forces, reviewed them, and made a speech, the gist of which was the slogan of militant Communists: better to die fighting than live on bended knee. He grouped his forces, placing Communists at the head and assigning the most dangerous posts to his three friends.

The next morning, under cover of a fog, the detachment made a desperate thrust. It swooped down into the valley from the mountains and pierced the ring of pursuers by a frontal attack. By the time the sun lighted up the lead-grey mountain peaks the partisans were already across the Bulgarian frontier, in Yugoslavian Macedonia. The most remarkable thing

about this breakthrough was that this group of some hundred, utterly exhausted men who were scarcely able to move, swollen with starvation, worn out by typhus and mountain fever, managed to carry all of its wounded and all of its arms, without abandoning anything in the snow.

But here, right after they set foot on Yugoslav soil, the remnants of the detachment and all four of the Russian soldiers almost perished.

While the men were sleeping the detachment was surrounded and attacked by Italian frontier guards. The mortally weary and sick partisans were not even thoroughly awake before the whole detachment was disarmed, interned, and herded into an improvised prison housed in the huge building of a plundered grain elevator.

It was so crowded in the main hall of this grain elevator, into which whole trains could have been driven, that the people could not even lie down. Here was an assemblage of peasants waiting for their fate to be decided—Macedonians, Serbs, Croats, who were suspected of partisan activities and of helping the Yugoslav People's Army.

A week later, somewhat rested and recovered, the friends began to consider plans for escape. Again Vasil Kopyto assumed the functions

of "foreign minister." Cautiously, he tried to approach the arrested Serbs with the proposal that they join forces in organizing an escape. He had taken a special liking to the Serbs because of their Slav appearance and their language, which was so like Russian. He decided that with them it would be easier to come to an agreement. But he was mistaken. The peasants laughed readily at his jokes, shared their tobacco with him and once even treated him to some strong home-brew, a bottle of which someone had skilfully smuggled past all the guards, but no sooner did he try to sound them out by talking about Yugoslav partisans, or by telling them about his misadventures in Bulgaria, than the men shut up like clams.

To all questions concerning politics they pleaded ignorance. They knew nothing about the partisans, and had no idea, they said, why they had been seized and flung into prison by the "Italianos."

So the four friends and their Bulgarian comrades decided to organize an escape alone. This time, too, the plan was proposed by Kopyto, whose fund of invention was inexhaustible. One night he suddenly clutched at his stomach and began to roll on the floor, rending the huge building with his frantic screams.

The Italian sentry, with a native curiosity, came into the storeroom with a flashlight to see what the matter was. Vasil was rolling about and howling zealously. Violent spasms convulsed his body. His screaming was so unearthly and yet so natural that even his friends became anxious. Perhaps something was really wrong with Vasil; perhaps he needed medical aid.

The sentry called in the other guard for advice. For a while both of them stood at the door, their rifles cocked, peering into the semi-darkness whence the piercing cries were coming. Then curiosity overcame caution. They pushed through the crowd of prisoners to the spot whence the noise was coming, and immediately they were attacked with stones. They fell without a murmur.

Vasil Kopyto donned an Italian uniform, which made him look like a boy who has grown out of his clothes. But that did not bother him. He took the keys from the belt of one of the guards, went outside, and opened all the other doors of the elevator. Attracted by the noise, the sentries of the outside patrol entered the yard, but they were too late. The mob had already broken out of the prison and the sentries were strangled.

The friends' bold deed served as their best

recommendation. The taciturn peasants from whom "foreign minister" Kopyto had been unable to drag a word, try as he might, proved to be no more nor less than wary soldiers of the People's Army. Having broken out of prison, they led the Russians and their Bulgarian comrades into the mountains of Macedonia. From there, over goat trails across gorges, mountain streams, cliffs, through forests, snow and ice, they led them to Bosnia, then the centre of partisan warfare. Here again no one tried to detain the four Soviet soldiers. The partisans even promised to equip them for their journey. But finding themselves once again in the midst of struggle, they could not remain outside of it. They joined one of the partisan detachments, contributing to it their experience, which was considerable by now, and military skill.

Once more their trip home was interrupted. Once more they began the life of soldiers at the front in an alien land, under an alien sky, in alien mountains.

For about a year the four friends fought in one of the divisions of the People's Army of Yugoslavia, whose ranks had swelled by that time. Vasil Kopyto, a miner by profession and an expert at blasting, earned the reputation of the best sapper in his regiment. No one could

compete with him in planting an explosive bomb in a railroad bed, or blowing up a bridge in the mountains, always managing to reach the river under the sentries' very noses. The Bosnians called him Basil, the equivalent of Vasil in their language. The Russian giant was beloved by all, and the girl partisans cast admiring glances in his direction.

Semyon Agafonov, the second fugitive, former electrician at a Ryazan power station, organized a mobile mechanic shop for repairing captured arms. When the detachment was forced to retreat and the partisan region shifted with it, the partisans moved this entire shop too, loading its disassembled machines, equipment, spare parts, tools and properties on donkeys, and sometimes on their own backs.

Konstantin Gorelkin, who had served in the Soviet Army before the war, became assistant combat commander. When there were lulls in the fighting he taught the Macedonian mountain herders and Serbian ploughmen the complicated art of modern warfare.

In the intervals between engagements, during mountain bivouacs, the Moscow schoolteacher Tkachenko lectured to the officers of the division on Marxism-Leninism, and on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet



Union (Bolsheviks). These people, exhausted by endless marches and warfare, devoted their brief and precious minutes of rest to these lectures. There was never any lack of listeners.

The four Russians traversed a difficult and glorious road with the soldiers of the People's Army. Every new engagement earned them the deeper respect of their friends. In one fierce battle fought by the People's Army to resist encirclement, Semyon Agafonov was killed.

On battle days, Agafonov had always left his repair shop to turn machine gunner. In this particular engagement he and his assistant, Blazho Popovich, a Serb, were stationed on a mountain pass with orders from Gorelkin to cover the detachment's breakthrough and descent into the valley. Agafonov fulfilled this assignment well and he and his comrade could have managed to get away. However, the retreating partisans were carrying their wounded with them, and this held up the column's march. Agafonov nailed the enemy to the ground with his machine-gun fire, preventing the Chetniks from getting across the pass. He went on firing until enemy scouts crept up from behind and fell upon him and his comrade. Then with a grenade he blew up himself, his

comrade, the machine gun, and the enemies who were pressing them.

The partisans down below saw the whole episode on the cliff. It shocked them profoundly, and although there was only a handful of them, they counterattacked and got back the bodies of the heroes. The Ryazan boy was solemnly buried beside the Serb from Voivodina on a grey mountain top in Bosnia.

Every peasant from the surrounding villages brought as big a rock as he could carry to the grave, in fulfilment of a decision passed at their village meetings. A hill of stone rose up on the partisan grave. In the Bosnian villages the foreign name Semyon was written down in many a family Bible.

But although the lives of the three surviving Russians were filled with intense struggle, the thought of getting home, of returning to the Soviet Army, from which four countries and over two thousand kilometres then divided them, never left their minds. True, in those days the distance was beginning to diminish. The Soviet Army had launched its offensive and was moving in their direction.

In December, having obtained the permission of partisan headquarters, the three Russians set out on their long journey, after taking leave of their many Yugoslav friends, who were so

like Soviet people in their valour and staunchness, their adamantine will to win, and their Slav straightforwardness; on leaving Yugoslavia they solemnly promised one another to move straight ahead, not to get involved in the struggle of other peoples, to pay no attention to anything. The Soviet Army was advancing, and deep down in his heart, each one of them was afraid it would finish the struggle without him.

They passed through the northwestern part of Yugoslavia, crossed Austria, and cut across the edge of Hungary without meeting with any unusual adventures. But here, not far from the Czechoslovak border, while fording a river one night, they encountered a Magyar patrol. Vasil Kopyto was wounded in the leg in the skirmish. Gorelkin carried him to the forest on his back. They lived in this forest for about a month, existing on berries, fish caught in a stream, fruit gathered by night from the trees lining the roads, and unripe corn which served as bread.

When Vasil's wound healed they crossed the Czechoslovak border.

Once more they found themselves in a Slav country where their language was easily understood, where not only the magic, now international, words "Red Army" but the very fact of

their Soviet citizenship served them as a reliable pass and opened up the hardest hearts. They would have crossed this country quickly if an unforeseen event had not held them up on the way.

The mountain village where they were spending the night had not supplied the contingent specified by Tiso's Slovak puppet government. No recruits had reported at the mobilization centres. The Slovaks did not want to fight for the Germans. A punitive detachment arrived in the village—truckloads of gendarmes made up of German colonists. They broke into the peasants' homes, and stuffed their sacks with the best things they could find. All the men without discrimination were arrested and herded into a barn. In those days the fascist puppets in Bratislava were feeling nervous because of the Soviet offensive. They wanted to prove that they were a strong government. And so they meted out punishment on the square opposite the church: the arrested men were publicly flogged.

Slovak peasants, like all mountaineers, are a proud and quick-tempered people. They took up their picks, scythes and pitchforks, and their shepherds' hatchet staffs—a formidable weapon in skilled hands. And here the battle experience of the three Russians who were spending the

night in one of the houses and happened to be on the scene of combat, came in very useful. The friends could not restrain themselves. They broke their word, joined in the fight, then took the lead and helped the peasants attack the gendarmes. The punitive detachment was almost annihilated. The peasants flung the enemy dead over the cliffs into a mountain river. Fearing retaliation, half the village took to the hills. But it is fatal for a large number of people to stay in the forest doing nothing at all, just waiting for raids and vengeance. The three Russians felt they had no right to abandon these fine, courageous, and absolutely inexperienced Slovak peasants to their fate. They formed them into a partisan detachment, one of the many then operating all over forest-covered, mountainous Czechoslovakia.

Again the friends joined the struggle, the struggle on alien land, against the same enemy their own army was fighting thousands of kilometres away. Just as a snowball rolling down a mountain top during a thaw gathers layers of wet snow, growing in size until it becomes a destructive avalanche, so did their detachment increase in size and strength as it moved fighting through the mountainous regions of the country. There were many people roaming about Europe then, people who had escaped from

hard labour, from concentration camps or prison camps. Gorelkin admitted the best of them into his detachment, which was gradually becoming an international group. In addition to Czechs and Slovaks, it included Frenchmen, Belgians, Serbs, and Dutch. It was joined by Magyar and Rumanian deserters who refused to fight for fascism. There was even a Negro in it—Sid Brown, a good-natured giant who was in charge of the detachment's food supplies.

Konstantin Gorelkin introduced stern discipline in the detachment, setting up a partisan court which strictly punished those who violated discipline. With his own hand, in the presence of all his men, he shot several persons who had fastened themselves upon the detachment in the hope of an easy life and with a taste for easy pickings. When they were not fighting, the detachment drilled, practised shooting, trench digging and camouflage. Even political education was conducted in the detachment, and Tkachenko's talks, in Russian and in German, reached his polyglot listeners sometimes through two and even three interpreters.

Soon the fame of this detachment spread to the mines in the mountains where the Germans were then trying to start the production of

iron and copper. The detachment was named after the Red Army. It attacked German trains, organized explosions in the shafts, disrupted the work of the mines.

In the summer of 1944 Vasil Kopyto, Czechoslovak partisan and Donbas miner, soldier of the Soviet Army, was killed.

The partisans' friends—they had made friends in all the mines—had reported to headquarters that the Germans were bringing in new equipment, a whole plant which they had dismantled somewhere in Belgium. Those were the days when the fascists were trying their hardest to increase steel production. Kopyto decided to take charge of blowing up the train himself. He chose a spot in the mountains where the railway made a sharp curve above an abyss. Accompanied by two Belgians, who had a vital interest in this demolition act, and armed with heavy explosive bombs which Czech Communist miners had made for them, Vasil Kopyto stole up to the railway curve. But the road was strongly guarded on that day. Small armoured cars rode up and down the line. A sentry was on guard at the spot chosen for the explosion. Their plan was in danger of falling through. Leaving the Belgians on the other side of the gorge, Kopyto slung the sack of bombs over his shoulder, crossed the gorge alone, and

scaled an almost perpendicular cliff to reach the railway.

As luck would have it, the sentry kept pacing back and forth only a few steps away. Vasil could not manage to find a moment to plant the bomb under the rails imperceptibly. The train could already be heard, whistling as it descended the hill. The rails hummed hollowly. The locomotive's anxious whistles, heavy puffing, and the grinding of its wheels on the rails echoed loudly in the gorge. The pointed nose of the locomotive came into sight, rounding the curve.

What Kopyto's thoughts were during those last seconds of his life can only be guessed. Before the sentry's very eyes he jumped over the rocky crest of the slope and sprinted forward. The Belgian partisans on the other side of the gorge could not make out what he was doing. All they saw was a tall figure rushing at the locomotive. Then a thunderous roar shook the mountains. The next instant they saw the locomotive and cars turn slowly over in the air and plunge down into the abyss, looking like a torn string of sausages.

Konstantin Gorelkin and Vladimir Tkachenko went on with the fight. At times their detachment numbered several hundred men. As soon as word of the Slovak rebellion spread

through the mountains and the partisan receiving set got the Banská-Bystrica radio appeal to the people to take up arms, the "Red Army Detachment" made a long and difficult march over the mountains, arrived in the region of the rebellion, and attacking straight from the march, captured an important railway junction from the Germans. . . .

"And now we are fighting not far from here. That's my whole story. We never got home, you see. Got mixed up in the fight on foreign soil again, didn't keep our word." Gorelkin heaved a sigh and began to sip his mug of bitter beer.

Suddenly I remembered the stories I had been told about a partisan regiment led by a famous commander named Gorelko, a half-legendary, international detachment which had come to the help of the rebels, no one seemed to know where from.

"Wait a minute, then Gorelko is. . . ."

"Me. That's right," he said simply, with a smile. "Back there, in the Rudnie mountains they gave me that name." He sighed again. "I'll never get home at this rate. Today I talked to the lieutenant-colonel," he mentioned the name of the Soviet liaison officer at the partisan *velitelstvo*. "Asked permission to set out to join my own army. He won't let me, says I'm

needed here. That's true; the people here are fine. They'd give their lives any minute for these mountains of theirs. Only they haven't learned to fight properly yet." He finished his beer and smiled dreamily, thinking about something far removed from his present turbulent duties. "So you're from Kalinin too, eh?"

And he began to ask questions about the life of our country, about the Soviet Army, about our home town, about the Volga, in the waters of which we had both fished for gudgeons as children, about the Tvertsa, on whose clean beaches we had sunned ourselves on holidays.

We talked till midnight. Engrossed in our reminiscences, we had not noticed that the café was already empty. The waiter had cleared all the other tables, set the chairs against them, and was standing to one side leaning against the wall and politely covering his yawns.

"So they went and burned down the Kazakov palace, where the regional executive committee used to be? The swine! Such a palace! But we're already restoring it? You don't say! Grand people, ours! And what about the bas-reliefs? I used to attend the plenums of the City Soviet there and I used to admire those bas-reliefs. Restoring them too? From old drawings?"

What about the theatre? Nothing at all left, not a trace? Too bad. . . . I remember how we all lugged bricks for the theatre when they were building it—at *subbotniks*. But you wait, we'll give it to them for our theatre!"

Slightly tipsy from the beer, he rocked back and forth and pounded on the table with his fist.

Meanwhile it was getting very late. The waiter, evidently tired of standing, had sat down in an armchair and dozed off, forgetting all the rules of restaurant etiquette. Obviously it was time to leave.

"How about the bridge across the Volga? Blown up? Is that so! The bridge, too! What a bridge that was—like a piece of lace. Been restored already? The very first year? Well, that's going some! They sure do work! I'll tell you something, I've been around the world, seen how people live in different places, and let me tell you: nobody knows how to work like we do! I mean it."

He smiled. The wrinkles in his tired, strong face, etched in by alien winds, smoothed out. And once more he looked like the round-cheeked, clear-eyed boy of the photograph on his Party card.

"Where did you get one of our new uniforms, and the insignia?"

“It was made here. It’s easier to fight in it. Better discipline, and I feel easier in my mind, like I was serving in the Red Army. After all, I have the right. Commissions are granted for life.”

“But why do you wear a sergeant’s insignia? You’re the commander of a whole regiment.”

“What the government gave me, that’s what I wear. Why, anything wrong? Senior Sergeant of the Red Army Konstantin Gorelkin! Not bad, eh?”



Nikolai Kharitonov, Sapper

THE THIRD turbine was being commissioned at the Kegum Power Plant on the broad Daugava, which flows majestically through Latvian forests and fields, between low grassy banks. For this small, young Soviet republic, the completion of a job of this size was a real holiday. Towns and villages had sent delegations. The most outstanding people of the republic were present. The great moment was at hand. The Latvian chief engineer, a tall, large-boned man with flaxen hair and a shrewd, roughhewn peasant face laid his hand on the lever to switch the current from the new turbine into the grid network. The silence in the huge, sunny room was broken only by the hum of machinery and the ticking of the clock on the wall. At that moment my eye was suddenly

attracted by a simple face, full of concern, that seemed somehow familiar.

A rather short man in army breeches and tunic (minus the shoulder straps) and well polished boots, was standing at a little distance from the guests and officials, and—either mechanically, or to conceal his excitement—was polishing the already shining surface of the new machine.

Surely I had seen that face somewhere before—dry, angular, neither handsome nor ordinary, furrowed with deep lines. And the hands were even more familiar than the face—not very large, but broad and strong, with short, flexible fingers—the skilful, sure hands of a worker, even now, in the moment of achievement, moving restlessly over the gleaming metal casing.

Where could I have met him?

Among the other ribbons on his tunic I saw two representing Orders of Glory. So he had been in the army. The black and emerald Königsberg ribbon showed that he had fought in these parts, on the Baltic front, and before that on the Kalinin front. That must be where I had met him. But when, where? Five years had passed since then.

The narrow grey eyes peering out from under bushy brows were sharp and sagacious.

And those eyes, with their keen alertness, were equally familiar.

Quietly I asked one of the construction workers who he was. The man looked at me in surprise.

"Don't you know? That's Nikolai Kharitonov, a prominent man in these parts, one of the best brigade leaders."

Nikolai Kharitonov! Immediately I was back in that grim summer of 1942. Pouring rain kept all the machines clamped to the roads. The difficult drive against Rzhev. Hard fighting in the military settlement on the outskirts in the massive stone houses which the Germans had turned into a strongly fortified district. I remembered four of these houses standing in parallel oblongs on one side of the road. We called them the "colonel" from their likeness on the map to the four oblong insignia colonels then wore on their collars, and the three on the other side which we called the "lieutenant-colonel" for the same reason. The Germans held the "colonel," we the "lieutenant-colonel." And this small area—one short stretch of road was the scene of fierce, bloody fighting.

We fought not only for each block or house, but for each room, for each stair landing. The division's reports to Army H.Q. would run:

“After hard fighting on the northern sector of the aerodrome settlement, our troops occupied apartments one and two of the first stripe in the ‘colonel.’ ”

It was in those days that the name of Nikolai Kharitonov, sapper, became known along the whole Kalinin front.

He worked real miracles. At night, wearing felt boots for greater silence, he would take some sticks of explosives and slip like a shadow from the “lieutenant-colonel” to the “colonel,” deposit them just as silently in some corner of a house swarming with Germans, light the fuse and disappear as though he had vanished into thin air. Then after the necessary time had elapsed, there would be an explosion, the infantry would dash forward into the gap and occupy several rooms or apartments before the smoke had time to disperse or the Germans to recover their wits.

In clearing the way for the infantry, Nikolai Kharitonov achieved what had been beyond the power of aircraft or artillery in that sector. It was at that time that I first made the acquaintance of that rugged-faced man in the cellar of one of the stripes of the “lieutenant-colonel.”

The sappers, overcome by weariness, had succumbed to heavy slumber. Snores in various

keys came from every corner, filling the cellar with a low rumble. The air was so thick that the flame of the tiny homemade lamp flickered and smoked as though about to go out at any moment. Beside the lamp sat a thin soldier of medium height, painstakingly whittling something from a piece of wood with a homemade and evidently very sharp knife. When I said I wanted to write about him in *Pravda* he regarded the idea very dubiously, and politely but firmly refused to talk about himself.

"What's there to write about?" he said, working away skilfully with his knife, which pared through the wood as easily as though it were a crisp turnip straight from the fields, instead of tough-grained pine. "Nothing interesting about me; we burrow in the ground, quietly, like moles. You'd do better to write about our sniper Solodkov—they say he's bagged thirty-two fascists. One against a whole platoon, you might say. That's something, now! Or the scout Bakharev. There's a soldier for you! You can read about him in our divisional newspaper. But what's there to write about me? I doubt if I've fired two clips of cartridges in the whole war. What's there to write about?"

He ceased working for a moment to peer

with the narrowed, satisfied glance of a skilled craftsman at his piece of wood, which was already beginning to take the form of a long wooden spoon.

He told me nothing about himself. But, to make up for it, his comrades in the company had a great deal to say, and it was from their stories that I pieced together my picture of Nikolai Kharitonov.

His hands were never idle. Whether he was sitting by the campfire while the porridge was boiling, or listening to Corporal Kapustin reading the paper aloud in the evening, Nikolai Kharitonov was always busy with something. He might be mending a greatcoat with big soldier stitches, or quietly sharpening an axe with a smooth stone found by the roadside, or simply whittling a piece of wood with his large homemade folding knife. And before the porridge had boiled, or Corporal Kapustin got as far as the third page, the piece of wood would have become a spoon, a cigarette holder, a pipe, or some other object needed in trench life.

Many such things made by Sergeant Nikolai Kharitonov could be found in the sapper company, which, as I remember, was commanded at the time by Captain Grushin. The sergeant was known among his comrades as a man who

could turn his hand to anything—a coolheaded efficient, brave and able soldier. The captain always gave him the most difficult jobs and Kharitonov carried them out exactly, and with invariable success.

He was sparing of words. Sometimes he would hardly say ten in a day, but the few that he uttered would always go the rounds of the company: Kharitonov said so and so, the sergeant advised us to do this and that.

His life had been just as simple, modest and worthy as himself. From childhood he had roamed the country with his father, a stove setter from Vyatka, installing simple Russian stoves in village cottages. He loved the work and became skilful at it. But when construction work was begun on the first industrial giants, he handed over his tools to his father, said goodbye, and went off to the Dnieper construction job. The sweep and scope of what was being done there had fired his imagination.

He began as an unskilled labourer—wheeling barrows, navvying—then he became a concrete pourer and ended as head of a brigade reinforcing concrete. His efficiency brought him the offer of a job on the permanent staff when the power plant was opened, but he refused. It was the actual process of construction that fascinated him, and right up to

the beginning of the war he was helping to build factories along the Dnieper—offshoots of the Dnieper power plant.

He was a particularly skilful bricklayer and stone mason and received the medal for Labour Valour.

During the first days of the war, Kharitonov built concrete fortifications at the approaches to the Dnieper. When German tanks broke through to the great river, he was among those entrusted with the demolition work. He saw the baleful smoke of explosions mushrooming up into the blue sky, saw the unleashed Dnieper lose its mirrorlike smoothness and rush turbulently through the gap, saw the crash of its waters, sweeping away and burying all that had been built at the cost of millions of working days and nights. On that morning he saw how steeled, brave men wept unashamed, without even hiding their faces, as they destroyed the finest work of their brains and hands rather than surrender it to the enemy. And, as he confessed to close friends, it was on that terrible day that the first premature threads of silver appeared in his black hair.

The builder became a sapper. The man with a passion for creating edifices of brick and concrete marched in the last ranks of the retreating troops, blowing up bridges, pumps

and power plants, destroying and mining roads.

With silent implacability Kharitonov carried out this demolition work, so hard for a workingman. And with every rending explosion his heart grew heavier with hatred for those who had made it necessary for him to destroy the products of man's brain and brawn, who compelled him, a famous builder, to tear down what he himself had raised up.

It may be that Kharitonov had in all truth fired less than two cartridge clips during the entire war, but the damage done to the enemy by the implacable hatred of this silent, reserved man might be compared with the work of a whole battery of guns.

His principal weapons were brains, ingenuity, skill, and a cool head. His friends told me that in the early days of the war their sapper group was sent behind enemy lines to mine a road over which German reinforcements were being brought up. On a stormy winter night the sappers crawled several kilometres through the snow along a frozen stream dragging the explosives on sleighs. Expecting a breakthrough, the Germans had themselves mined the road in checkerboard pattern, posting warning notices for their own transports.

The sappers crawled to this road. The frozen snow crackled. It was so hard and smooth, so polished by traffic, that the slightest scratch could be seen, let alone the marks of newly-laid mines. What was to be done? While his comrades were racking their brains, Nikolai Kharitonov rolled up the sleeves of his camouflage coveralls and, moving quietly in his felt boots, went onto the road and began rearranging the German notices in the same checkerboard pattern—but in reverse order—carefully smoothing out the holes left by the pegs.

At dawn, back again in the guard dugout with a mug of steaming tea—even at the front Kharitonov never touched liquor—he grinned as he heard the dull sound of distant explosions from the German side. The enemy's transport had fallen into the trap, and their machines had gone up on their own mines.

Another night, just before the storming of Kalinin, which the Soviet Army had surrounded on three sides, Kharitonov was sent to cut the wires guarding the enemy permanent fortifications. The captain warned him that the ground in front of the wires was thickly mined in some new method not yet solved, and that several sappers from a neighbouring battalion had been blown up there.

Kharitonov took his clippers and crawled along in the tracks of one of those who had perished. He made his way to the wire and, before starting work, examined long and carefully the place where his comrade had been killed. The smoke-blackened patch stood out clearly under the very wire itself—that meant the secret had something to do with the wire. Kharitonov crawled along beside it and suddenly noticed some almost invisible, snow-powdered threads running down from the barbs. The sapper crawled to one of them, cautiously scratched away the snow around it and then began thawing it with his breath, without touching or disturbing the thread.

He knew that this thread led to death. His lips were nearly touching it. When a melted hollow began to form in the snow, he distinguished the outlines of a round metal cylinder. The trick was exposed. The thread would convey the slightest vibration of the wire to a sensitive detonator. A powerful mine would be set off, killing the incautious sapper, destroying all traces which might betray the secret, and at the same time warning the Germans of someone's approach.

Having discovered the secret, Kharitonov threw off his sheepskin jacket and cautiously set to work.

In the forward trench, Captain Grushin was counting the slow seconds and peering impatiently into the darkness where the sergeant had disappeared. The time set had long since passed, but Kharitonov did not return. There had been no explosion, however—that meant he was alive. Shivering with cold, the captain continued staring at his watch. At last, just before dawn, when the cold mist was becoming thin and grey, he heard heavy breathing and the crunching of snow.

Kharitonov tumbled over the breastwork into the trench—exhausted, covered with scratches, his teeth chattering, a crooked smile on his blue lips. He took out of his pocket a metal cylinder that looked rather like a coffee tin.

“There it is. Have to show the boys. I cut twenty-eight of these things off the wire. A smart trick—at the least movement of the wire you’re done for.” He tossed the now harmless mine carelessly onto the ground, then drew himself up and reported: “Passages cut and marked with spruce tips. Comrade Captain.”

Later on, when he had time to spare, Kharitonov made a meticulous study of the mine he had brought. He learned its mechanism, took it apart and showed his comrades the whole

secret of this really very simple German invention. He showed them how to find the connecting threads and how, after drawing the threads downwards and slackening their tension "so as not to wake up the mine," they could safely take the sting out of this "mystery" with an ordinary pocketknife.

Kharitonov's abilities were invaluable during the spring offensive along the thawing roads of the Kalinin region. The Germans were using all their vast mining technique in an effort to get their troops away in safety as they retreated before the Soviet drive. They planted booby traps along the roads and paths, on the thresholds of cottages and at the entrances to blockhouses, in abandoned trucks and guns, in abandoned food stores—even attached them to crosses on graves and to the bodies of their own dead.

Kharitonov and his sapper scouts marched in front of one of the advancing battalions, investigating the road with mine detectors, testing with bores and grapnels, carefully examining every object on the road.

In silent concentration he would indicate to his comrades a case of canned milk fastened with an apparently innocent rope leading, as he put it, "straight to hell," or a new pair of army boots lying in the opening of a dugout, one of

which contained a mine with a sensitive detonator. Once, in a captured town, he even pointed to a half-open volume of Pushkin's verse lying in the mud, the binding cleverly connected with a high-explosive charge buried in the ground.

"Look what those swine have done—they know how much we care for books. Nothing doing, you don't catch us, we're old hands," he said.

In the presence of his comrades, who made a dash for safety, he took a razor blade, cut the thread connecting the volume with the buried explosives, then carefully wiped the mud off the pages, slipped the book into his gas-mask holder, and began unhurriedly digging up the mine.

When they were already close to Rzhev, Kharitonov did a job that established his fame not only in the regiment, but in the division as well.

A heavy tank seeking a ford over a stream had run onto a powerful anti-tank mine. The traffic control man had halted the machine, but too late. By some happy chance, however, the mine landed between two of the ribs in the caterpillar tread. It was clamped in tight, but the pressure had not been sufficient to set it off. Any movement, however, or the slight-



est jolt threatened disaster. But to dig a mine from under a tread, a mine buried in frozen snow and earth, seemed impossible.

That was the kind of job Nikolai Kharitonov volunteered for. He insisted that everybody move away to a safe distance and he set to work. Lying down, he threw off his mittens and began very gently scratching away the hard snow from under the tread. His cautious, sensitive fingers slid around the mine, as supple as a cat's paws. He avoided touching the cold metal. When the frozen snow resisted him, he bent right down to the mine, thawing the snow with his breath, gently removing it, and repeating the operation again and again. It took a whole hour of such work to get rid of just a few handfuls of snow and earth.

It was one of those March days of sharp spring frost that sometimes come to the forest areas of the Kalinin region. A strong north wind was blowing. Whistling through the pine tops, it carried flurries of dry, stinging snow along the fields with their occasional bare, black patches of soil, then swept it along the banks of the stream where Kharitonov was working by the tank.

The tank crew, the sappers and their commander sitting around a fire some distance away, were racked with suspense, expecting

the fatal explosion at any moment. They were frozen through. They could not bear to think what it must have been like for their comrade lying out there in the wind and snow, cheek by jowl with death.

"Hi there, Kharitonov! The major says you're to come and warm up! Come on over to the fire!" they shouted.

"No time!"

Kharitonov actually felt nothing of the cold. He had thrown off his greatcoat and spread it under him and removed his belt. But still he was hot, streaming with perspiration. Hoarfrost formed on his sweat-drenched tunic. His heart was beating as though he were lifting some tremendous weight. He breathed in gasps, and black circles swam before his eyes.

... And all he was doing was lying prone on the ground, gently scraping away the snow with his nails.

His fingers were numb and ached unbearably. When all sensitivity was gone, he thrust his hands beneath his shirt and warmed them in his armpits, then continued scraping away the snow with the same stubborn persistence. He worked on until dusk. Night brought a sharpening of the cold. Bright stars pricked the sky, and digging became more difficult.

His comrades could stand it no longer. Heedless of his remonstrances, they brought him a pan of steaming soup, some liquor, and a hunk of bread warmed over the fire and smelling of smoke.

But he would eat nothing.. He could not eat. His throat was constricted. All his strength and attention were concentrated on that accursed red plate which now lay elevated on pillars of frozen soil. He felt neither hunger, cold, nor weariness. He swallowed the liquor without tasting it, took a bite of bread, and angrily drove everybody away from the tank.

As soon as his comrades were at a good distance, he lay down again on the greatcoat and huddled over the mine.

He worked like that for fourteen hours. The wind had died down, clouds had covered the sky, and the forest was rustling gently and kindly with a promise of spring when the men by the fire saw a figure with a greatcoat flung over his shoulders rise slowly beyond the mound and come towards them, swaying.

Kharitonov was carrying the now harmless mine. He dropped it beside the fire and said to the tankmen hoarsely: "Start up, everything's all right now."

The next instant he had collapsed in his comrades' arms.

The sappers had many interesting things to tell about him as we sat around the smoky little lamp in a cellar beneath one of the "lieutenant-colonel" buildings near Rzhev. And all the time he himself was whittling busily, absorbed in his work. When the spoon was ready, he polished it with a fragment of glass, wiped it on the flap of his greatcoat, admired it, and then held it out to me.

"Take it as a souvenir," he said. "May come in handy. . . . What they've told you is true. These things did happen. Everybody has his own way of fighting. But what's there to write about? I'm sick of it myself—blowing things up, wrecking, destroying. I want some real work. My hands are itching for it. Would you believe it, every night I dream of laying bricks for a house, pouring or reinforcing concrete. If only we could blow all this fascism to hell and get down to a real job!"

. . . And now here he was, tense, excited, preoccupied, standing in the spacious room filled with sunshine and the hum of turbines. He was listening to the murmur of the new machines as a mother listens to her child's first cry, and his grey eyes beneath the bushy brows were full of a deep human happiness.

At that moment, when the last of the three new turbines lifted up its voice in a power plant that had risen from ashes, this man was repaid for those five years of hard, dreary demolition work, for the racking moments he had experienced when the Dnieper dam was blown up, for the tense hours of lying by the mine beneath the tank, for the explosions in the houses which army slang had dubbed the "colonel."

And how much work there is ahead for that keen, indefatigable brain, those sinewy, skilful hands that know no rest in their yearning for real work!



Liberated

IN A RAPID advance to complete the encircling of Upper Silesia Soviet tank troops broke through to the Oder River. An endless, shifting torrent of machines rushed at full speed along the highway, disappearing around the curves in clouds of blue-grey smoke. The infantrymen in short, frost-stiffened sheepskins, who sat on the tanks held their mittened hands in front of their faces to protect them from the keen blast, and rested their oilstained felt boots on the logs and wooden bars fastened to the armour. Their right hands firmly grasped the butts of their tommy guns and their eyes, streaming from the cold, kept a sharp watch on the surrounding country.

But the hilly landscape bisected by the asphalt highway, was completely deserted and somehow ominously desolate. Past them circled

a monotonous panorama of grey, ribbed fields, which had half thawed, but were now again gripped by frost. Naked woods approached the highway here and there only to suddenly sheer off to the horizon. In the distance, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, villages flashed by, their gabled roofs and the grey spires of the churches so tiresomely uniform that it seemed as if someone were shifting one and the same model from place to place.

The torrent of solid steel kept moving swiftly westward amid a clanking of treads and a roaring of motors. There were tanks whose winter camouflage had not yet been washed away; there were armoured cars shaped like flatirons and painted in mottled colours suggesting fish scales; heavy armoured carriers bearing infantrymen and rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns; big pot-bellied benzine tanks, rolling heavily and squatting as they moved; covered trucks filled with infantrymen and arms. When our agile jeep separated from this stream and climbed a hill, the view below was that of a colossal steel snake covered with glistening grey scales crawling along the road, its head and tail disappearing beyond the horizon.

At sunrise that day the German front had been broken not far from the old Polish fron-

tier, and armoured and tank troops poured into the breach, turning the flanks of the breakthrough and leaving the retreating enemy somewhere in the rear. The heavy frost prevented us from gazing over the fields. A head wind swept sharp fine snow into our faces and forced us deeper into our seats, making us crouch down behind the window glass for protection.

Suddenly the driver, who was worn out by following the tank column along this smooth, wide road and had resorted to humming to keep from falling asleep, jumped alert and began to wipe the windshield with his mitten.

"Hey, what's that? How did they get here?"

At this spot the road crawled slowly uphill. On the very top of the hill we could see a crowd of women. They were waving and shouting something to the tankmen; but the machines kept moving on past them.

"Hey, look, they're Russian women! Honest to God, Russians!" exclaimed the chauffeur. "Asking for a lift, probably. Aren't they crazy? No one will take them on! My God! They're barefoot, no fooling—barefoot."

By now it was evident that the women were not simply saluting our tanks. They were shouting to the men, asking them to do something, pressing their hands to their breasts and waving kerchiefs. But the tommy gunners perched

on the armour merely shrugged their shoulders and pointed to the road, as if to say: "Can't help you—no time, got to fight." And the crowd of women would rush hopefully to the next machine.

They were all wearing coveralls made of sackings; their heads were covered with torn rags and from a distance it seemed to us that all of them were old and thin. But the most startling thing about them was their feet, their bare, blue, chapped feet. Only a few of them had rags substituting for shoes. The asphalt was burning cold and a low wind blew the dry snow over the ground with a rustle.

When our car reached the top and approached the crowd, a few of the women broke away, joined hands and barred our path. Their weather-beaten faces wore an expression of desperate resolution.

"Stop! At least you! We won't let you go on!" one of them cried out in singsong Ukrainian, her enormous black eyes flashing beneath her kerchief.

"We're from Russia, can't you see?" came from the crowd.

And one of the women, whose flaming red hair streamed in the wind, kept repeating urgently:

"Comrades, comrades, comrades...."

The chauffeur drove the car out of the column and stopped by the roadside; past us moved tanks with the frozen but cheerful motorized infantrymen perched on top.

The women crowded around our jeep. Their thin, gaunt faces with sharply-outlined, angular cheekbones and eyes inflamed by wind and tears glowed with frenzied joy. Some of them were weeping. All of them were so excited that it was hard to find out who they were, why they were here, and what they wanted.

For safety's sake the elderly tommy gunner who was escorting us jumped out of the back seat and took up his post near the car, stretching his numb legs. The women immediately rushed over to him and began to stroke his rough coat, his worn cap with earflaps, and his tommy gun with the lock carefully wrapped in a rag. It seemed as if they were still trying to convince themselves that this was not a dream, but that a real, live Red Army man in a sheepskin coat and felt boots was standing here, on this German highway, along the alien Oder River. And suddenly the little brunette with enormous black eyes, who had been the first to bar our car's path so resolutely, seized the tommy gunner's big, gnarled hand with tobacco-stained fingertips and pressed it to her lips.

"My dear, my own. . . . Our own. . . . Oh,

how we dreamed of this moment! How long we waited!"

The tommy gunner scowled in embarrassment and a flush mounted to his unshaven cheeks. He jerked his hand away.

"What's the big idea—kissing hands!... What d'ye think I am anyway, a priest, or what? Some habits the Germans have taught you!"

These words seemed to transform the woman. Frozen and miserable in her ragged, ugly coverall, she quickly straightened up, tossed her head proudly, and replied with a flash of her black eyes:

"What a fool! Do you think it's you I'm kissing? I'm kissing the hand of the Red Army for liberating us, for coming here. And you thought...."

Turning towards us, she introduced herself in a businesslike voice with a slight Ukrainian accent:

"Katerina Kuklenko.... Secretary of the Secret Committee of conscripted Soviet citizens forced to work on the 'Sofienburg' estate.... To whom shall we turn over the refrigerator containing meat, the stores of grain, and the war prisoners we are holding under guard?"

Only that morning this region was far behind German lines. The battle was raging forty

kilometres to the east. And now we were unexpectedly confronted by this calm statement coming from the midst of these agitated women, stunned by their unexpected luck.

“And take this from us,” the one who called herself Katerina Kuklenko said. “Mila, give me the paper.”

The tall woman who had been repeating the word “Comrades” in every possible key, drew a paper from her bosom and held it out. And although I read it in the wind, standing on a German highway, amidst the roar of passing tanks, which now rose, now subsided, this unusual document, written painstakingly in a fine hand, made such a deep impression on my mind that even now, two years later, I can repeat the text almost word for word:

“To the Red Army Command from the Secret Committee of conscripted Soviet citizens forced to work on the estate of Klara Richtenau, ‘Sofienburg,’ *Kreis* Steinau.

“We request that our glorious Red Army, which has liberated us from fascist slavery, accept from us: 25 tons of white flour; 100 tons of potatoes; one ton of dried turnips; 38 frozen pigs’ carcasses; 6 war prisoners from the *Volkssturm*, whom we have taken and are holding under guard.

"We also request that, all of us (100 persons) be allowed to join the Red Army so that we may take revenge on the accursed fascists for the bitter tears they have made us shed and for the friends they have murdered. We beg that this request of ours be granted.

"Secretary of the Secret Committee Yekaterina Kuklenko.

"Commissar of the Committee Ludmilla Serebriiskaya."

This was all so extraordinary, the women's appearance contrasted so strongly with the calm, businesslike tone of the statement, and this incident here on German soil so far away from the front line was so unusual and interesting that we decided to risk dropping behind the column and turn off the highway. The driver invited Kuklenko to get into the car, but she refused:

"We've got two women here with scurvy. They can hardly stand up. We practically carried them here. Let them ride," she said, then called out in a voice that showed she was accustomed to giving orders: "Aunt Pasha and Anna Nikiforovna! Get into the car with these officers!"

She herself jumped lightly onto the flat

radiator, made herself comfortable sitting sideways and drawing up her legs, which were neatly wrapped in rags, and began to point out the road to us.

The women seated in our car were in such a condition that they could not even talk straight: Aunt Pasha, an old woman with swollen legs, stiff as logs, and a puffy, bloated face, sighed all the time and wept quietly, smearing the tears all over her cheeks with her fists. The other, a younger woman whom they called Anna Nikiforovna, kept glancing about her in fear and peering at the bare frozen hills.

"Are you sure they won't come back?" she kept asking. "Are you really sure? You're not fooling us?"

When the shaggy foliage of the ancient park and the pointed tile roof of the castle came into view from behind the hill she began to tremble so that her teeth chattered. She cowered and crouched down on the floor of the car, as if instinctively afraid that she would be noticed here with us.

"What are you so scared about, Auntie? It's all kaput with the fascists now. It's the end of Hitler for sure, and no maybe," the lummy gunner said, trying to soothe her, and he pointed to Kuklenko sitting tight on the hood. The wind beat against her face, tore the dark rag

from her head, ruffled her hair and pulled down the heavy braids which had been wound about her head. Now we could see that she was a very young girl. She leaned forward with her face turned to the wind and smiled. One might have thought she was well-fed, warmly clothed, and out on a lark.

"See, Auntie, that's the way to be: she doesn't even know what fear is, and the cold doesn't bother her either—a fine girl," said the tommy gunner looking at her with admiration.

The woman smiled faintly:

"But that's Katya. She's different.... How they beat her, even set the dogs on her...."

A robust, elderly woman wearing a German army coat and carrying a shotgun stood at the park gates. On the castle grounds, opposite the ironbound doors of the old stone storerooms, another woman was standing on guard. She was wearing a fashionable and expensive seal coat and a pair of men's hunting boots and had a kerchief wound about her head in Russian style. A German tommy gun was slung over her shoulder. From a turret flagpole high above the tiles of the castle's gabled roofs, fluttered a red flag.

"There's women for you! They've managed fine; you'd think they were guarding a command post," the tommy gunner exclaimed in

surprise. "Take a look at the flag, will you? When did you vixens manage to hoist that up?"

"Yesterday . . . yesterday morning at dawn, as soon as your guns began to thunder," answered Anna Nikiforovna still trembling. "What an uproar there was! It was awful! I thought for sure I'd die of fright. . . ."

Half an hour later we were sitting in one of the rooms in the big castle, cold as a cellar and as cheerless too, listening to the story of these women and of what had happened yesterday, when artillery preparation began fifty kilometres away.

There were various types of women here, and various roads had brought them together.

Katya Kuklenko naturally could not remember pre-Revolutionary Russia; she even had only a vague recollection of the countryside before the days of the kolkhozes. As long as she could remember, she had lived on a kolkhoz. While still at school she had helped her mother (a well-known brigade leader in the Kiev region) gather sugar beets from the high-yield plantations. When in the seventh grade she had organized a group of school girls who had gone out to the fields and outstripped her mother's brigade for high yield; along with Maria Demchenko, she had received a medal at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. The newspa-

pers had written about her. She was invited to Kiev to give a radio talk on her agricultural methods. Every day the mailman brought her bundles of letters bearing postmarks of cities and regions all over the country. Complete strangers wrote to her. Old men sent respectful greetings. Young people wanted to carry on a correspondence with the renowned girl. Peasants working on test plots asked her for advice. While working as a brigade leader, Katya studied hard for entrance exams to the Agricultural Academy.

Then the war broke out, the district was cut off, and it was impossible to get away. SS men of the *Sonderkommandos* hunted young people with dogs and rifles, as if they were tracking valuable game. Katya tried to evade mobilization, but she got caught in one of the raids. She was beaten up, tied and thrown into a truck. A number and a German eagle holding a swastika in its claws were branded with silver nitrate on her right arm, just above the elbow.

And an attempt was made to turn this girl, born in a country where exploitation, as well as slavery, have become purely historical conceptions, this girl whom scientists had consulted and whose hand People's Commissars had shaken—an attempt was made to turn this girl

into less than a slave—into a beast of burden with a brand on her arm.

During one of her many journeys from one concentration camp to another, Serebrietskaya, a tall, well-built, red-haired girl, met Katya Kuklenko. She noticed her in a box car they were both travelling in. Throughout the journey Serebrietskaya sat quietly in a corner, her arms locked about her knees, her chin pressed against them, her brows knit, not talking to a soul, but hearing and observing everything. It was hard to guess what was going on in her mind.

Ludmilla Serebrietskaya was born in Minsk, into the family of a highly respected physician. A capable but still unsettled girl, Ludmilla became interested successively in physical culture, poetry, the theatre, and finally, while studying in the Leningrad Polytechnical Institute, in philosophy and social work. Before long she was elected secretary of the department's Komsomol organization.

When the war broke out she was spending her vacation at her sick father's bedside. She could not leave the dying old man, and so she remained in occupied Minsk. She ran herself ragged trying to contact an underground or partisan organization. But before she succeeded in this she landed in a slave transport. The years she spent in concentration camps did not break

her spirit. Whatever the conditions, she always managed to find the right kind of people, to knit them together into secret organizations which went in for sabotage, pouring sand into machines, throwing pieces of rubber into gas tanks, etc. She took advantage of her knowledge of German to worm her way into the camp offices where she earned the reputation of being a most conscientious employee. This gave her the opportunity to do such things as steal leave permits for runaways and draw up false documents for people returning home.

Three times she ran away. Once she even succeeded in making her way on foot from the English Channel to the Dvina. But each time she was arrested, tortured, beaten, and sent back to the transportation centre. She did not give up. Lying bruised and beaten on the flooded floor of the transportation camp prison, she would analyze the reason for her failure and begin to plan a new escape.

Here she was now—after her third attempt to escape—in a slave transport slowly moving south, to Silesia; sitting there in her corner she immediately took notice of the short, dark-eyed, vivacious Ukrainian girl, tidily dressed, with black, heavy braids wound neatly about her head. She stood out among the moping, weeping girls who, in their despair, neglected their

appearance. Ludmilla liked this girl's staunchness in misfortune, her readiness to help her companions, her ringing voice—defiant and unpleasantly strident when, standing in the doorway of the car, she rained abuse on the guards; rich and melodious when she struck up a beloved Soviet song in which everybody joined.

At first Ludmilla thought she was a flighty girl, an indiscriminating weed which easily struck roots even when transplanted to the rottenest soil. But when one morning Katya began in her teasing voice to berate the girls for sitting around unwashed, uncombed, untidy, and "spreading contagion," Ludmilla began to take a serious interest in her.

"Fools you are, absolute idiots!" the girl cried, her black eyes flashing angrily. "You think it's a good thing to sink to the level of beasts. That's just what those swine, the fascist skunks, want; they want us to forget we're human, to become cattle, that's what those fascists think they can do to us. Well, they've got another think coming, the curs!" and she furiously snapped her fingers at the crack in the door, beyond which an alien, monotonous landscape spun past.

"I read somewhere that our great revolutionaries, even the ones sentenced to death, used

to do gymnastics in prison to preserve their strength."

And without further ado, probably in order to arouse the girls, she began to do physical exercises in the car; she did them persistently, to the rolling rhythm of the wheels, and the girls watched her with surprise and respectful awe.

"What's the use of saving our strength? We'll only have to work for the enemy," said Ludmilla, wishing to put her to the final test.

The black-eyed girl flushed.

"Me? Work for that vermin? For that scum?... They'll weep tears of blood because of the work I do." And bringing her swarthy face so close to Ludmilla that the latter felt her hot breath, she whispered: "You want to know what I need strength for? I need it to run away! You'll rot away in a cellar if you have no strength! That's just what they want, for us to lose our strength."

"Hush!" Ludmilla cautiously put her hand over the girl's mouth.

"Hush? What for? Let them hear. I'm not afraid of anyone."

"That's a pity: you want to preserve your strength, but not your head."

The girls looked at one another intently, smiled, and then burst out laughing. From that

time on they were bound by the ties of a firm friendship, the kind that springs up between people in times of peril and severe trial.

The transport arrived in Kreuzburg, the site of the central Silesian market for slaves brought from all over Europe by the organization under SS Brigadenführer Sauckel. The girls were hustled out of the train and marched off under guard to a huge empty hangar on the outskirts of the town. Here they were lined up in rows and forbidden to sit down. Then came a crowd of people who all looked strangely alike to the girls: stocky, red-faced, square-jawed and bull-necked, all dressed in knickerbockers, hunting jackets and green hats with grouse feathers stuck in them. The girls guessed that these were Silesian landowners from the Oder Valley. There were women among them too—clumsy, ponderous women with big feet.

As they walked among the rows of slave-girls these women squeamishly drew their skirts round them and held handkerchiefs to their noses. The group was escorted by an official wearing a black, high-crowned cap.

The landlords looked the girls over in a businesslike manner, made them turn around, felt their muscles to see how strong they were, and one skinny, sallow-faced, malicious-looking woman wearing men's trousers and carrying a

came even stuck her fingers in the girls' mouths to see that their teeth were sound and gums untouched by scurvy.

The two friends were standing side by side.

"Like cattle in a market. . . . What vermin? Oh-h-h, the scum!" whispered Katya.

Pale and trembling, she stood there biting her lip until the blood came. She looked as if she would have a stroke any minute. Ludmilla gently patted her hand, which hung cold and limp at her side. Ludmilla was thoroughly familiar with this procedure. Oh yes, she knew what the fascists were! Her hatred had reached such a pitch that she had stopped regarding them as people. And now she stood there like a statue, calm and cold, her head raised proudly as she gazed contemptuously at the crowd.

The landlords unceremoniously pushed up the sleeves of the girls they chose, and called out the branded number to the official. The latter wrote the number down in his book and two old, bow-legged *Volkssturm* soldiers in uniforms that hung loosely on their skinny bodies led the selected girls off to the end of the hangar and stood them next to the wall under a sign bearing the name of the landlord who had chosen them.

"I shan't be able to contain myself. If he touches me I'll scratch his eyes out, I'll kick

him in the belly," Katya whispered, and drops of blood dripped down her rounded childlike chin leaving dark stains on the concrete floor.

"The touch of vermin is repulsive, but it cannot insult a human being," Ludmilla replied coldly.

"Just look at them, standing there like princesses! Bolsheviks, I bet," said a fat, red-faced man with a scarred eyebrow as he approached the two friends.

Ludmilla understood what he said. The fat man looked her over from top to toe, smirked with satisfaction and stretched out a short, freckled hand covered with shaggy red fuzz to feel her muscles, but he encountered such a look from the narrowed grey eyes that he involuntarily jerked his hand back and disappeared in the crowd, mumbling:

"Well, well, better not be so high and mighty. We are the masters here."

"That's right, it's better to keep away from that kind. . . . I shouldn't like to meet that Bolshevik Lorelei in a Russian forest," said another man sympathetically.

"I'll take these two. They look good and strong," said the sallow-faced woman in pants. "I don't care how they look at me, it's their muscles that I need. I've got strong nerves, thank God!"

And she threw a withering look at the men, who could not meet her gaze.

Nevertheless, she did not approach the girls either, merely ordering the soldiers to look at their numbers and write them down.

Thus the friends landed at "Sofienburg," a large estate belonging to Colonel Richard Richtenau. The colonel was fighting somewhere on the Eastern front, and the management of his estate was left to his wife Klara, the sallow-faced woman who had chosen the two girls. She picked fifty other girls at the same time.

The first thing that happened to them at "Sofienburg" was that their clothes and remaining personal belongings were taken away and replaced by sackcloth coveralls and wooden clogs. On the next holiday Frau Richtenau presented the girls' clothes to the German women farm labourers. She had two purposes in doing this: to reward and show preference to the German women, and to drive a permanent wedge between them and the women from the East.

The slavegirls were quartered in an old stable, four of them to a stall, where they slept on tiered bunks. An armful of straw was issued to each with the warning that there would be no new issue for six months. They were fed three times a day, the meals consisting of a piece of

bran bread and a half a litre of beet soup that even a pig would have refused to eat. There were no stoves in the stable. During the heavy Silesian frosts the girls pushed their bunks together and slept next to each other, warming each other with their bodies. There were other empty quarters in the castle, more suitable to live in, but Klara Richtenau had her own ideas about how to treat slaves. She strived to make them forget that they were human beings, to break their spirit through starvation, cold and beatings.

The last link in this system was corporal punishment. The unfortunate transgressors were dragged to the garage and whipped. The flogging was administered by Frau Richtenau's chauffeur Kurt—a huge, clumsy fellow with long ape-like arms. This was one of his duties and he performed it unemotionally, as neatly and accurately, as he performed any other task he was charged with. Neither the abuse nor the tears of the victims altered the indifferent expression on his long, pale face. However, sometimes Frau Richtenau herself, in her men's clothes, carrying her cane, would burst into the garage during a flogging. For a while she would watch from afar as the whip descended with a whistle, leaving livid scars on the body; her thin nostrils would begin to quiver

and, unable to restrain herself, she would tear the whip from Kurt's hands and begin to flog the victim herself. And she brought the whip down in a special way that drew blood at once. Blood and cries seemed to excite her—her face would begin to twitch, foam appeared at the corners of her mouth and her eyes rolled wildly. Sometimes, in a paroxysm, she would go on whipping her victim until she herself fell exhausted into the chauffeur's arms.

In the end, however, when two of her victims died after a flogging and one girl, unable to stand the humiliation, drowned herself in the Oder, the *Kreis* officials forbade these bloody orgies in the garage, threatening to take away the slaves. The flogging ceased, but the whole system of life at "Sofienburg," subtly designed to turn the girls into dumb beasts, was cultivated as before. Upon their arrival the two friends instinctively divined the aim of their mistress and declared a relentless and subtle war against her. With a practised eye Ludmilla, who was experienced in such things, quickly discerned the most reliable of the women, those with whom they could talk frankly. Katya's splendid work on the beet plantation had revealed her flare for organization, her ability to approach people and

to win their support. Now she applied these gifts to organizing the trusted women into a Secret Committee. At first the committee set itself the task of maintaining morale among the workingwomen, keeping them from giving way to dejection and raising their spirits. They shamed the slatterns, made them wash and look after themselves, cared for the sick and shared their rations with those who were particularly emaciated, even stealing potatoes, grain and flour for them. The committee was kept very secret, but all the women constantly felt its guiding and encouraging influence and in times of difficulty they sought its protection. They even feared it a bit.

Feeling that they were no longer alone, the women gradually began to emerge from their state of passive indifference. When this had been accomplished, the friends began to act with more resolution. They became ruthless in the secret struggle with Frau Richtenau, and extraordinary, seemingly inexplicable, misfortunes began to overtake "Sofienburg" one after another.

Once, on a windy day, the barn full of hay suddenly caught fire and burned to the ground and the cattle were left without forage. Another time the young stock began to die off for no reason at all. The splendid hogs, of whose size

Frau Klara was so proud, and which were intended for the army, began to succumb to a strange disease: they refused to eat, began to lose weight and then died. Over half the pigs died before a veterinary who was summoned from Breslau discovered shavings of hard bristle and fragments of broken glass in the dead animals' intestines. The pigsties on the farm were a holy sanctuary. Only German women were in charge there. They were arrested and taken to town on the accusation of sabotage. But fresh misfortunes continued to undermine the once prosperous model farm.

Tractors would suddenly stall before they even reached the fields. It turned out there was sand in the ballbearings. The managers of grain elevators threatened to take Frau Klara to court for turning in tick-ridden grain. When the spring sugar refining season began, it was discovered that the beets, which usually kept excellently through the winter, had rotted and turned into a disgusting malodorous mush. Something even went wrong suddenly with Frau Richtenau's private car, a blue "Opel Kapitän," a gift from her husband, which, as a family treasure, was kept under special cover. It began to break down every time it was taken out. Once it even had to be towed back by a tractor. This went on until Kurt discovered

a piece of rubber at the bottom of the gas tank.

Katya Kuklenko, the little, black-eyed girl whose kolkhoz brigade had once been famous all over the district for its thrift and efficiency, now thought up innumerable methods of sabotage. All the knowledge she had gained in striving to protect the home farm from damage and accident was now applied to demolition purposes. And since the committee now consisted of twenty girls who performed the most diverse jobs on the farm, she was able to strike blows cautiously and surely, without leaving a trace.

Frau Richtenau was desperate. And no wonder! Her large, once flourishing farm was clearly falling to pieces; she was unable to meet the state taxes in kind, and was fined for the inferior quality of the produce sold to retail firms. Naturally she guessed where the blows were coming from, but she could not lay her finger on the perpetrators. She altered her attitude to the Russian slavegirls, forbade the overseers to strike them during work, gave them rest days and improved their food; she even came among them herself, tried to talk to them, slapped them jovially on the back, but to no avail. All these Russians looked alike to her. They all had the same face, and the expression on this face was grim, contemptu-

on, formidable. Oh, if only there were hands to be hired! How happy she would be to send every single one of them to a concentration camp! There they would get a different kind of talking to! But there were no hands to be hired and Frau Klara could only resort to manoeuvres.

At the state kennels she bought a dozen huge police dogs, specially trained for manhunting. At night she would unleash them. They howled and yapped in the yard, ready to tear to pieces anyone who showed himself outside. Her husband's friend, chief of the Steinau garrison, sent her six *Volkssturm* soldiers. All night they stood inside the castle and at the gates. But nothing helped. Late in the autumn several ricks of unthreshed grain burned. True, ricks burned at neighbouring farms too. How could one possibly find out who had set fire to them?

Frau Richtenau appealed to God and to the Gestapo. God did not respond. The Gestapo sent an official. Over a good supper, flushed with wine, the collar of his tunic unbuttoned, he listened solicitously to the landlady's tale of woe.

"Fires? Losing stock? That's nothing new. Lamentable, but not new! Ticks in the wheat? We've had that before too. Yes, things are not

so good at the front. Those cursed Russians are getting very near the borders. No, no! No disciplinary measures at present.... Caution, extreme caution with these bondservants, especially the Russians. Too many of them brought to Germany, that's a fact. With dynamite in the house the master himself must walk softly. Yes indeed! Have you heard the latest news? The Vistula's been forced. Terrible times. Those Russians—why did we ever get mixed up with them? What does your respected husband write from the Eastern front? Eastern front—how strange that sounds now, when that front is in our back yards!"

The official left the next morning with a military escort. Nowadays they travelled with guards even on their own land. And that night Frau Richtenau lay in her huge, cold bed without putting the lights out in the room. She listened to the frightening howl of the watchdogs in the yard under her windows and the measured tread of the soldiers echoing loudly under the vaulting of the old building. She was a prisoner in her own castle. She fancied she saw the haggard faces of her slavegirls, the shadows on their hollow cheeks, their scowling foreheads marred by premature furrows, their eyes flashing deep in their sockets, formidable and terrifying. What were they

doing now? She seemed to hear their sinister whispering. They were surely plotting something.... Oh! what horrible times!

If the mistress had only known what these women were doing in those hours when she lay trembling in her wide bed, listening to the harsh noises of the winter night! In the semi-darkness of the bare stable with uneven clusters of icicles gleaming dimly on the walls, the girls sat huddled together in a compact circle on their board beds, warming each other with their bodies. Ludmilla's slim figure rose in the centre. In a low, rich voice the girl was reciting Mayakovsky, her favourite poet, many of whose works she knew by heart.

A piece of suet was melting in a shallow cardboard box; the wick flickered and spluttered. A huge shadow darted over the walls and ceiling of the stable, and, ringing like the peals of a small bell, the passionate, barbed words fell into the midst of the hushed group. And to the girls it seemed that these words, emerging in little clouds of vapour from the frozen lips of their friend, were coming to them from far away, from over there, from their native land. Then Ludmilla's place was taken by round-faced, freckled Anna Nikiforovna, who had been a librarian in Smolensk. She could hardly walk on her legs, swollen with scurvy.

The sick, bloated woman was gently lifted into the seat of an old sleigh, from where she related the stories of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Gorky from memory.

For several weeks now Anna Nikiforovna had been bedridden. Neither the lockup in the cold cellar of the castle, nor Kurt's threats could drive her out to work. But now when she began to talk, in her thoughts she was back in the dear, distant world, where not so long ago she had worked among books. Her pale, bloated face grew animated, her eyes sparkled under heavy, swollen lids and her low, cracked voice gained strength and filled the dank stable. Forgetting all else, the girls leaned forward, hypnotized by the sound of her voice.

Sometimes there were political talks. Ludmilla would disappear somewhere, and when she returned she would tell them the latest news: the Sovinformburo communique. The girls did not know where she got the news and they made no attempt to find out. They were a little afraid of sharp, stern Ludmilla, but they believed in her and waited for her brief communications in a fever of impatience.

One day Ludmilla, usually so self-possessed, sprang up onto the window of the stable all excited, dishevelled and radiant. Snow-

flakes glistened on her auburn curls which had fallen in disorder to her shoulders. Without lowering her voice she cried out:

"We've broken through the front! We've broken through! Our men are moving towards Czesstochowa—that's not a hundred kilometres from here. We've not much longer to wait, girls! Hold on, it won't be long now!"

And, leaning for support against the thickly-frosted window frame, this strong-willed girl who always held her emotions in check, burst into tears.

Before long a flood of refugees poured down the roads leading west—to Oppeln, Steinau, Breslau. SS patrols drove them off the highways, clearing the way for troops, and the refugees plodded over the frozen fields, through the woods, getting stuck in the mud, losing children in the confusion, abandoning bicycles, baby carriages full of bundles and wheelbarrows piled high with household goods. The irresistible torrent of panic which suddenly swept westward told more eloquently than any communique what was going on at the front. All work stopped on the estate. The *Volkssturm* men locked the girls in the stable every night and walked up and down before the doors. When food was brought to the slavegirls, two soldiers stationed themselves by the tank of hog-wash

and trained their tommy guns on the girls, until the tank was emptied.

The *Volkssturm* men looked wretched and frightened. They started at the slightest sound and their old, sunken mouths simpered placatingly when the women openly taunted them. By Frau Richtenau's orders the girls' shoes were hidden away to prevent them from leaving the stable.

The captives became more cheerful. For the first time laughter was heard in the dreary stable. In the evenings the strains of songs—simple, sweet melodies of their far-off homeland—floated through the iron-barred windows. At times the slavegirls sang until late into the night, and no one dared order them to stop. These peaceful songs made the inhabitants of the castle uneasy, and they kept lights burning in all the rooms throughout the night.

One morning the stable was roused by a joyful cry. One of the girls, as yet unwashed and uncombed, was yelling at the top of her voice. The women crowded round her unable to understand a thing. The girl kept on shouting and pointing east. Some one put her hand over the girl's mouth and then they all heard the deep-throated booming of distant guns, hardly distinguishable above the vague murmur of the park.

"Our army," someone whispered.

And again they became very still, listening. This was no product of their imagination. The girl was not dreaming, though the gunfire was still very far away and the explosions sounded muffled, like potatoes pouring into a cellar down a wooden chute. And to the listening women these were not guns pounding away, but a beloved, familiar voice calling to them from afar.

"At last... at long last.... Now a friendly hand will close my eyes," said Aunt Pasha, who was dying from scurvy and rheumatism, and she began fervently to cross herself.

The women rushed over to her.

"You won't die now, our people won't let you! They'll make you well!"

Everybody began to laugh and cry and embrace; something like an attack of group hysteria took possession of them, and Katya and Ludmilla could not calm them down. Then Katya called out:

"A song, girls, a song!" and in her rich low contralto she struck up the slavegirls' favourite song, *Katyusha*, a song which reminded them of their youth, of love, of their distant homeland, of all the fine, human values they had been deprived of here. And every one of them,

even Aunt Pasha, joined in. Hoarse sounds came from Aunt Pasha's swollen mouth, and tears rolled down the wrinkles of her puffy cheeks.

While the others were singing, Katya disappeared through one of the windows which opened onto the barn roof. Ever since the police dogs had been set prowling in the yard, this had been the committee members' only means of communication with the outside world. Katya ran nimbly over the roof, jumped onto a stack of firewood, took a look around, avidly breathing in the cold morning air, slid down and, like a light shadow in the greyish fog, she sped across the outside yard and knocked softly but insistently at a small dormer window. To her surprise she did not have to knock long. Although it was so early, someone was stirring inside and the window was opened at once.

"Fräulein Katya. . . . *Schnell, schnell,*" a hoarse voice whispered.

Katya slipped in through the slit of the door. It was here, in the tiny room of Karl, the estate electrician, a mechanic from the town of Hindenburg and an old anti-fascist with whom the girls from the secret committee had made friends, that they obtained the news about their country. Karl had a cheap radio set. At eleven

o'clock he would let Katya or Ludmilla in, help them tune in on Moscow and then take a seat in a corner and smoke a long pipe in silence, enveloped in clouds of poisonous smoke. Karl was a taciturn man and lived alone. Their friendship had begun when he had come up to Ludmilla in the yard one day and silently pushed a bag of something into her hands, pointing to his teeth. Several of the girls had come down with scurvy at that time. The bag contained garlic. That was back in the autumn. Since then Katya and Ludmilla had taken turns going to his room to listen to the radio.

He never talked to them; he merely smoked in silence. Sometimes he brought them medicine for the sick. The girls called him "Uncle Karl." Now, however, contrary to his calm nature, this incomprehensible person was excited. He did not sit down in the wicker chair in the corner with his pipe—he stopped Katya on the threshold and whispered:

"Your people have broken through. Frau Klara has received an order from Steinau to burn the stores of grain and meat and to shoot the stock."

Karl nervously rubbed his bony fingers, deformed by rheumatism. . . . He was German, and as such he felt too ashamed to say what

else the gentlemen from the *Kreis* had ordered Frau Klara to do, but he told Katya to have the women get out of the stable as quickly as possible, to get out before another minute passed, before it was too late.

Katya realized that some terrible danger threatened them. She had confidence in Uncle Karl. He would not get upset for nothing. A plan flashed through her mind at once. Could he do them a last service: cut the telephone wire which connected the castle with Steinau? The German nodded silently: he would do it at once.

Katya rushed back at top speed. Throwing caution to the winds, she cried out as soon as she reached the stable window:

"Girls, our army is coming! Do you hear me, girls? Grab up anything you can lay your hands on!" And, fearing that the fit of hysteria might be repeated, she jumped into the stable and began to pull at the iron to which restive horses had once been tied.

The women understood her. They scattered through the stable, breaking and pulling up everything that could be broken or pulled up, arming themselves with boards, sticks, hoes and spades.

The cracking of wood, and the shattering of broken glass worked them up, rousing even

the most timid. They forced open the folding doors, knocked down the sentries, and poured in two streams into the paved yard of the castle. The sentries were disarmed on the spot and did not even attempt to resist. One group of women, led by Katya flourishing a pickaxe, headed for the wing where the *Volkssturm* soldiers were quartered; the other, led by Ludmilla, ran across the yard to the castle.

Under the furious blows of iron bars the carved oaken door split and fell. Someone fired through it into the crowd, but the report of the gun was lost in the noise and shouts, and only the two women who fell to the ground in a pool of blood warned the rest by their death that there was an ambush awaiting them behind the door.

Kurt, the chauffeur, and the Richtenau's valet, Richard, who was so old he could hardly stand on his feet, made an attempt, revolvers in hand, to check the mob in the hall. They both fell dead on the spot with crushed skulls.

Meanwhile, Frau Richtenau, wearing a man's travelling suit, was thrashing madly about her room, stuffing money, papers and jewels into valises. The car, the motor of which had been kept warm all through the

night, was waiting for her in the park. Kurt and the old valet, her most loyal employees, had instructions to set fire to the stores of grain and meat and the old wooden stable in which the barefoot slavegirls were locked. She had received these orders from the Kreisleiter of Steinau himself.

But when everything was ready, something happened outside. Frau Klara ran to the window, lifted the black-out curtain, and started back in horror. In the freezing darkness dim figures in sackcloth coveralls were flitting about in the yard. The mistress of "Sofienburg" grabbed the phone. The receiver was ominously silent. The Frau wanted to run to the park gate where the car was waiting; she could drive it herself. But how could she possibly leave the money, papers, and family treasures behind? She must take something—the barest minimum. So she frantically began to stuff banknotes into the pockets of her breeches and jacket.

Shots downstairs, in the hall. That was Kurt. He'd stop them; he would not let them in. A racket. Shouts, stamping up the stairs. Had they broken in? God Almighty! A host of tramping feet in the vast old hall, in the bleak drawing room. She must fly, fly at once! Frau Klara sprang towards the door. Too late. Her retreat



was cut off. Blows were shaking the door. What were they pounding with? A panel fell out; a thin, gnarled hand was thrust through the opening and began to fumble for the lock.

"Here she is!" someone shouted triumphantly, in Russian....

For one instant the mob stood still in the open doorway. Frau Richtenau saw only flushed faces and furious eyes. She fell to her knees. She stretched out a handful of money to the women, she swore to give them all, all, everything she had; she begged forgiveness, she mumbled something about the great Russian spirit, the goodness of the Russian heart....

But then a tall, slim, red-haired girl came forward; her fiery locks tumbled in disorder over the sorry-looking sackcloth coverall. She held a spade in her hands. The nostrils of her thin, aquiline nose were dilated:

"Silence, you wretch! Don't you dare utter those words!" she said in excellent German.

No mercy was to be expected from them. In sudden inspiration, Frau Richtenau pulled a small lady's Browning from her pocket—and dropped to the ground on the spot with her skull cleaved. One twitching hand grasped the burnished steel tightly, and the other convul-

sively crumpled a handful of banknotes that no one cared about. Ludmilla cast away the bloody spade and, in an ordinary, everyday voice which sobered all the girls immediately, said:

“To a dog, a dog’s death. Now, girls, go easy. Don’t break or spoil anything.” She ran her steel-grey eyes over the crowd sternly and added in a low, but distinct voice, so that even those standing in the adjoining room heard her: “Is that clear?”

Meanwhile Katya Kuklenko and her group led the captive *Volkssturm* men from the wing. Their hands were tied, but this was more for the sake of form. When the *Volkssturm* men had caught sight of the mob which overwhelmed the guard, they locked themselves in, set up a barricade of furniture and prepared to put up a defence. But one of the women shouted to them in German that if they did not immediately crawl out of their holes, they would set fire to the building. There was a minute’s pause and then a white towel tied to a mopstick appeared in the window. The remnants of the bold garrison surrendered without firing a shot; they were disarmed and solemnly escorted to the castle cellar.

Ludmilla immediately armed the girls of the committee with the captured weapons, posted

guards outside the castle, the storerooms, and at the gates. Katya Kuklenko took over the management of the estate. She commissioned several women to count the quantity of grain, meat and other food stores on the estate. Then she sent a group to the kitchen to cook a royal meal and quartered the girls in the castle.

After that they took measures to safeguard themselves. The pluckier girls were armed with captured tommy guns, rifles and shotguns from the Richtenau collection. There were not enough to go around, so some received old-fashioned flintlocks, halberds, pitchforks and axes. Four of the bravest and most sensible girls were sent out to the Steinau road. If they sighted an approaching punitive expedition they were to set fire to a can of gasoline they took along. The girls made preparations for battle, and even for a siege. The shelling from the east, which was growing louder and louder, encouraged them, and instilled them with confidence that they could hold out till the Soviet Army arrived.

The can of gasoline was not fated to burn. Early in the morning the girls came rushing in madly from the road. They were running through the yard at top speed shouting only two words:

“Our army! Our army! Our army!”

To all questions they kept replying: “Our army, our tanks are out there on the road. Stars on their caps . . . sheepskin coats . . . valenki. . . . Our army! Really and truly ours!”

And then all the women inside the castle rushed off to the highway. Even Aunt Pasha tried to drag herself after the crowd. The women lifted her up and carried her through the park and the snow-covered fields to the highway, over which an endless steel snake of tanks was moving sinuously over the hills. . . .

And this is the whole story as we heard it, sitting in a gloomy, black oak room of “Sofienburg.” The coals glowed warmly and brightly in the big old fireplace. A snowstorm raged outside, howled in the chimney, scratched at the lancet windows, whose stained glass in lead frames depicted medieval hunting scenes. Blue flames flickered and danced over the coals. Smoke smelling of sulphur blew into the room. The old parquet creaked in adjoining dark rooms. The pendulum of the ancient clock swung slowly and measuredly and occasionally the passing of time would be barked out in a hoarse, strained voice.

To all of us this was alien - part of a strange,

terrible world. But into this room, filled with the furniture of past centuries, came worried-looking women, paying no attention to their unusual surroundings, to report in a businesslike manner the most ordinary household things to the thin girl with enormous, deep-set eyes: time to feed the pigs; what should they be given? The grain, which they themselves had soaked some two weeks ago, should be aired to keep it from rotting. The girls standing guard should be relieved more often, because it was getting colder toward evening. They also reported that there was a pile of bedclothes in the cellars which might be of use to army hospitals.

Then an old, round-shouldered German with a long curved pipe came in, and, crumpling a faded green hat in his knobby fingers, offered to set the motors going so that there would be light and water again and the radiator pipes would not burst. This was Uncle Karl. In the German manner, he stood at attention before Katya and spoke to her as if she were the owner of the estate. An elderly, sick-looking woman brought in a heap of spoons and other silverware and spilled it from her skirt onto the table: it could be used in some army dining room.

The quick little girl with the black braids

around her head and enormous tired and beautiful eyes issued brief orders, so businesslike and authoritative, that one saw in her an experienced manager of this huge estate, rather than the branded slavegirl of a few hours before.

Her friend sat in a corner. In the light of a tiny lamp, the reflection of which gleamed on her red-gold locks making them seem alive, she was busily registering the valuables found in the castle. Indifferently she counted the precious stones, and when she was through, carelessly flung the pendants, earrings, rings, necklaces and locket into the disorderly heap lying in front of her. She was preparing to turn over these valuables which the women had found in Frau Richtenau's safe to the Soviet Army.

Outside in the yard the hungry hounds, specially trained for manhunting, rattled their chains, barked and howled in their iron-bound kennels. In the spacious bedroom, at the foot of the large, canopied bed bearing the family coat of arms, amidst scattered banknotes and bright securities lay the body of Klara Richtenau, an expression of horror and helpless fury frozen on her livid face.

In the unlighted rooms upstairs the women crowded about the frosty windows facing the highway. They scratched holes into the fro-

zen tracery with their fingernails and breathed on the glass to make clearings through which they gazed into the darkness. Beyond the tops of the ancient lime trees stretched an endless line of white lights, now disappearing, now reappearing, thrusting their rays through the gloom. These were the tank divisions which had poured into the gap and were encircling Silesia as they moved westward. The women could not tear their eyes from the lights of the machines, and whispered to each other, enjoying the sound of the words:

“Our army! Think of it, girls—ours! It’s enough to drive you mad with joy! Our own people!”



A Road of War

THE SOUND of the cannonade did not come from up ahead, as is most often the case at war, but from the right and the left, and to Lieutenant Vladimir Pastukhov, frozen stiff behind the cold steering wheel, it seemed as if he were riding in a narrow corridor, walled in on either side by gun reports and explosions. The truck's powerful motor, tired of running in first, groaned with the strain, and the chains on the wheels clanged fitfully as they scattered the wet snow. The wounded driver, Corporal Likhodeyev, whom the lieutenant had strapped to the back of the seat at his own request, kept grinding his teeth with pain and hoarsely cursing god and the Germans, the weather, and this infernal snow-bound road. Sometimes he fainted away, and then he would moan piteously and, in a low,

caressing voice, entirely unexpected in this big, rather rough man, begin to call his wife Zina. A damp wind blew through the shattered glass of the cab. Likhodeyev would come to, look at the speedometer, which indicated between five and ten, and begin to swear again.

Here and there a black geyser of earth suddenly shot up with a roar on the blue snow plain crossed by gleaming drifts. And the huge, mushroomlike cloud of the explosion dissipated slowly in the cloudless blue sky.

"They're trying to hit the column, the bastards," Likhodeyev hissed through his teeth, and added: "Take a look, Comrade Lieutenant, are the men keeping the distance? A hit in one of our loads of ammunition wouldn't be so good."

Without stopping the car the lieutenant opened the door and looked back. No, his men were experienced, they strictly kept the distance between the trucks. The machines stretched like widely-spaced black heads over the white plain, the tail of the column disappearing behind the sloping hill where the blue of the sky merged with the dazzling blanket of snow. As for the lieutenant, he had no time to bother about explosions. All his attention was concentrated on two things: the speedometer, which indicat-

ed a very low figure, and the sounds of the cannonade, which was so intense that it was often impossible to distinguish separate reports. To the lieutenant, however, it seemed that the thunder of the guns was diminishing, and he would be overcome by the profound despair of a young man with a fervent heart who has not experienced all the ups and downs of life.

"Won't we make it?" he asked himself over and over again. Involuntarily his hand shifted gear, his foot stepped on the gas, and the car roared, jerked forward, and stopped, the chains on its skidding wheels convulsively scattering the snow.

"Haste makes waste," Likhodeyev said through clenched teeth, and stretched his big hands, stained with dry blood, toward the wheel.

The lieutenant shifted back to first gear and the motor transport crawled along at a speed as agonizing as a nightmare in which a person tries to run away from danger, but cannot lift his feet off the ground. The road was invisible under the snow, but the skeletons of smashed and charred machines, landmarks on the white plain, indicated where it lay. The road was deserted. Only now and then did they meet with wounded soldiers straggling singly or in

groups over the winding footpath. Impelled by a driver's professional curiosity, Likhodeyev would stick his head out of the damaged cab and ask:

"Well, friend, how goes it? Are we giving it to them hot?"

The wounded men gave various replies. Each one thought his sector of the battle was the most important and most dangerous. But all of them agreed that the Germans were ramming at the ring round them with extraordinary vehemence and that today's fighting was the fiercest they had had since the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky battle began eighteen days before.

"Got any shells left, comrades?" Likhodeyev shouted to two wounded artillerymen who were hobbling over the snow, holding on to each other for support.

"Not too many.... We're counting them, counting every one," replied one of them whose head was swathed in bandage. "Step on the gas, what are you crawling for? They're waiting for you over there...."

Likhodeyev sagged limply against his straps. The lieutenant groaned and bent over the steering wheel. He was overcome by a dreary numbness. Was it possible that they wouldn't make it? That the guns would fall silent on account

of them—on account of him, him alone—and that the Germans would break through, that enemy spearheads would meet, and the tens of thousands of enemy soldiers, tightly bottled up by the skill and cunning of Soviet generals, would escape from the trap?

Lieutenant Vladimir Pastukhov considered himself a failure at the front. He blamed it all on his boyhood passion for automobiles. Each one of his school friends had had a hobby of his own. The boy he had sat next to at school, Sasha Sukhanov, a small, husky, wiry fellow, had gone in for sports. The quiet, thin, absent-minded Igor Morozov had become a "radio fan" in the sixth grade and spent all his free time right up till he graduated building extraordinary receiving and television sets. Vladimir Pastukhov, son of the driver for the Regional Committee of the Party, had been mad about automobiles from early childhood. He spent all his vacations in his father's garage and at the local auto club, pottering about motors and studying designs. At fifteen he got his driver's license and had a thorough knowledge of the motors of all the automobile makes in the town. At school they called these three boys, who were inseparable, despite the diversity of their interests, the "Three Musketeers." All three were secretly in love with their slim little

~~classmate~~, Nina Sokolova, who did not go in for sports, automobiles or radio, but spent all her free time in the school biology laboratory among amphibians, reptiles and rodents.

On that quiet, clear Sunday when the radio suddenly broadcast Comrade Molotov's austere and courageous speech informing the Soviet people of the fascists' perfidious attack on the Soviet Union, the "Three Musketeers" and their slender lady met without previous arrangement in the waiting room of the district military commissariat. The room was packed with conscripts and dim with cigarette smoke. The friends were too young to be called up, but each had brought a request addressed to the military commissar, written in haste and couched in the most urgent terms. Being Young Communist League members, they asked to be allowed to join the Soviet Army as volunteers.

Those were busy times in the commissariat. The overworked clerks could hardly manage to attend to the men who had been called up. No one would even talk to the three boys and the pretty girl in dainty shoes and a colourful Sunday dress. Towards evening the indignant young people crashed the cordon of clerks and broke into the commissar's office, flourishing

their applications. They declared that they all wanted to serve in the same unit.

With difficulty the pale, haggard, exhausted major tore his glance away from the endless papers and listened absent-mindedly to their request. The shadow of a smile appeared on his grey lips, and with a sigh he wrote on their applications: "To the formation department." And here the friends' roads parted.

The sportsman Sukhanov landed in the infantry and was immediately placed in a reconnaissance company. Morozov was sent to the rear to train for work behind enemy lines. Little Nina was assigned to training courses for army nurses. And Vladimir Pastukhov, to his horror and indignation, was assigned to the motor company of a tank brigade which was being formed not far from the town. On taking leave of each other, the friends consoled him the best they could, and they all promised to write to each other once a month.

From the very first days Vladimir Pastukhov distinguished himself for his technical knowledge and sense of discipline. The command wanted to assign him to repair work, but this would have kept him even further away from the fighting line, so Vladimir implored the commander to give him a truck. The commander, who trusted him implicitly, began to

assign him the most difficult and important **jobs** to do. Gradually he acquired experience. Once at Stalingrad, while delivering ammunition to anti-tank batteries which had taken cover in a hollow and were beating back an attack of German tanks, the transport commander was killed. Pastukhov took his place and led the transport column under fire along the edge of the ravine to the battery positions without losses. He arrived in the nick of time. The gunners were using their last shells.

Pastukhov was promoted to Junior Lieutenant and appointed commander of a motor transport unit. Before long his unit was the best in the corps. Lieutenant Pastukhov's name began to appear more and more often in headquarters' reports. He himself, however continued to long for "a real job," and when letters began to arrive from his friends at various parts of the front, he withdrew into himself completely.

Lively, self-confident Sasha Sukhanov wrote vividly about the deeds of his reconnaissance platoon, about daring sallies behind enemy lines, about the capture of "tongues," about lightning acts of sabotage. Morozov, the quietest of the three, wrote nothing for about six months, and then came a long letter which described in detail how he had penetrated behind enemy lines somewhere in the south, from

where he had corrected the fire of our navy batteries by radio, and how his radio later helped the partisans accomplish a long and difficult march through the mountains. Little Nina filled all her letters, written in a neat, school-girl hand, with the deeds of her heroic friends who carried wounded men off the battlefield under fire. She modestly wrote nothing about herself, but the lieutenant sensed that a certain matter-of-fact heroism had become part of Nina's daily life. As time passed and the distance that divided them increased, the sweet, considerate girl became ever dearer to him.

What could he write back to his friends who were in the very thick of the war, on its most dangerous sectors? That he punctually delivered bread and shells to the fighters? That his transport drivers were fond of him and obeyed him? That at the last inspection his machines were found to be in excellent condition and that he and his men had won first place in the army for economizing gasoline?

It seemed to him that Nina, all absorbed in her noble, heroic work, would contemptuously wrinkle her snub nose if she received a letter from him enumerating such prosaic things, so far removed from actual war as he saw it. "Look what he's boasting about, the hack-driver!" she would say. With that in his mind he

would write his friends brief letters, more like reports. They all scolded him for the terseness of his letters and caustically suggested that he had become a regular bureaucrat in his motor transport battalion. In her last letter Nina even made some general remarks about how work in the rear services spoiled people, changing them to such an extent that they even forgot their childhood friends.

With a sigh the lieutenant imagined how quickly he would dispel all the darling girl's doubts if he could talk to her. He would find words to tell her that every free minute he had was dedicated to her, that as he fell asleep somewhere on the road, the thought of her made him feel warm and cosy in spite of the cold, and that in moments of danger her bright image appeared to him, bringing him courage and self-possession. If he could talk to her he would tell her about his friend, Corporal Likhodedyev, about other drivers who would willingly follow him into the inferno itself, about all the brave, valiant, friendly soldiers! But the words which would come so easily if he saw her just would not go down on paper. So, afraid to amuse the girls of the army censorship and the addressee herself by too florid a style, he furiously tore his long letter to bits and penned a terse, dry reply on half a

sheet of paper, which sounded like a report on goods delivered.

However, there came a day when Lieutenant Pastukhov thought he might finally have something to write to the girl he loved and to his far-off friends. The units of the Soviet Army which had launched a spring offensive beyond the Dnieper had encircled a large German group at Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi. Continuing to advance over roads which had turned into impassable quagmires—as they do in the Ukrainian spring—they kept tightening the ring. Only at Stalingrad had Lieutenant Pastukhov seen such an enormous quantity of materiel, such a huge number of enemy dead lying in ravines, gorges, fields, on the outskirts of villages and edges of forests, as he saw here, on the rich, black Ukrainian earth which had already thrown off its blanket of snow and was now steeped in moisture.

All arms were cooperating in this master operation, and Lieutenant Pastukhov's motor transport unit, the best in the mobile mechanized group, carried army goods for fifteen days straight, without a single halt for repairs or for sleep. Towards the end of the fifteenth day headquarters finally permitted the drivers to rest. Dog-tired, they had a good feed and fell asleep on the seats of their cabs. The lieutenant

himself was overpowered by sleep at the dump where he had just turned over the ammunition. He dropped off sitting on a pile of shavings, and his loyal friend Likhodeyev did not wake him; he only placed his knapsack under his head and wrapped a canvas cover round him to keep him warm. •

The lieutenant slept, and he dreamed of Nina as she looked in the last picture she had sent him: in the uniform of a sergeant which was very becoming. In his dream she was laughing, shaking him by the shoulder and pulling insistently at his hand. He knew that he must follow her, he tried with all his might to budge but, as so often happens in dreams, despite all his efforts he remained rooted to the spot. Finally Nina got angry, took hold of him with both hands and pulled. The force holding him back weakened. Crying out joyfully, he started to follow Nina—and opened his eyes.... The bright ray of a flashlight was shining full in his face, and from the darkness beyond came the familiar, bass voice of the ammunition supply chief saying hoarsely:

“We-ll-l! You sure do sleep, let me tell you.... Brush those shavings off quick and go straight to the general.... An important assignment.”

Still under the pleasant spell of his dream, his heart beating fast, the lieutenant hurried through the squashy mud following the vague figure of the ammunition supply chief whose flashlight threw a bright light on the slushy path, on the white wall of a cottage, on the mud-covered boots of sentries standing at attention. The aide, who was dozing in the hall on an upturned barrel which still exuded the spicy smell of pickled tomatoes, led them into the house immediately. There the commander of the mechanized unit, a young but grey-haired general, whose large, round spectacles gave him an altogether civilian air, was walking back and forth in the white light of a battery lamp, his hands behind his back and his trim boots creaking.

"Took you a long time," the general said huskily, straightening his spectacles and deftly slipping the bows behind his ears. "Is the transport in running order? Gas tanks full?"

"Everything is in order, Comrade General," replied the lieutenant briskly. He was about to add that the men were resting after having worked fifteen days at a stretch with almost no break, but the general gave him no chance.

"Lieutenant Pastukhov," he said, "this is an assignment from the Commander of the Front. You are to set out at once for the vi-

cinity of Shpola. There you will get trench-mortars and tank shells at the ammunitions dump. And you are to be back with them by," the general glanced at his watch, then raised his eyes to the lieutenant's young face, slowly flushing with excitement, "by 2 p.m. tomorrow."

Once when German tanks had broken through our lines and attacked Corps Headquarters, Lieutenant Pastukhov had observed the perfect self-control with which this scholarly-looking general had issued orders and directed the repulsion of the surprise attack. But now he was clearly upset, and made no attempt to conceal it. After the lieutenant had repeated the order, the general led him over to a map which covered the whole table like a cloth.

"Get this clear, Lieutenant Pastukhov: perhaps the fate of this splendid Stalin operation depends to some extent on you."

Shaded in on the map in blue pencil, not far from the heavy blue line which marked the Dnieper, was a small, imperfect oval embracing only a few inhabited points. A narrow strip covered with many of our units separated this oval from the German army's front line, and sharp blue arrows from the middle of the encircled group and from the op-

posite side, were directed towards this strip. With his pencil the general touched the centre of the narrow isthmus dividing the surrounded group from the main forces of the Germans. It was at this point the ominous arrows were directed.

"This is where we are," he said. "Understand? An order of Hitler's has been intercepted instructing the surrounded troops to break our ring at any cost. Do you hear that?" The general gestured in the direction of the shelling which made the windowpanes of the cottage rattle and the water sparkling in the cold light of the lamp ripple in the jug. "That is General Hube's First Tank Army, which is pushing towards them from the south," he continued. "They are battering at our ring on two sides. The commander of the front himself," the general respectfully named one of the most prominent Soviet Army leaders, "was just here in this house. He gave us an order from General Headquarters not to let a single German out of the ring. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Comrade General," Pastukhov replied in a low voice, his heart beating with excitement at the thought that he was being let in on secrets of military strategy. It thumped so loudly he felt certain the general could

hear it, and he stealthily laid his hand over it.

"We shall carry out this order if shells are delivered to us on time. Do you understand? Some will be dropped by parachute, but yours is the main job. The Germans will not break through if your splendid motor transport column defies this wretched mud and brings us the ammunition. Is that clear? Report to me personally when you arrive with the shells."

The lieutenant clipped out a "Yes, Comrade General!" snapped his heels together, and without even asking the general's permission to leave, ran out of the house. At last he had been entrusted with a real job! He was all aglow with happy excitement, and the sleepy-eyed men who were roused and dragged out of the trucks with difficulty at once became infected with his energy, shaking off their heavy sleep like a duck shakes off water. In ten minutes the column had already passed beyond the village, its headlights dimmed, motors chugging, skid-chains scattering the thick mud.

The lieutenant's heart sang with joy. It all seemed like a continuation of his happy dream. He knew that the trucks would not let him down. He had faith in his men.

And true enough, despite the mud paralyzing all traffic on the roads and compelling the Germans to abandon dozens, even hundreds of machines, the transport column reached the army ammunition dumps even ahead of schedule. The drivers lined up, forming a living conveyor to help load the shells. Everybody worked with so much enthusiasm that the cases of steel were handed into the trucks as lightly as plywood crates of tea. Even the slow, staid warehouse keepers and the condescending clerks were caught up in the wave of enthusiasm and helped with the loading.

One hour later the column was on its way back. Lieutenant Pastukhov was elated. Perhaps they would get over the worst section before dawn, before the roads which had frozen during the night turned back into a mess of sticky mud. And in his imagination he saw himself reporting to the general that the ammunition had been delivered ahead of time, and the general thanking him and his men, and later, when they were permitted to rest, he saw himself in some quiet corner of a cottage feverishly writing a letter, a long letter, to Nina, the kind of letter he had dreamed of writing for over two years of restless army life. He could actually hear the ready phrases of the letter he would write. Yes,

now he would write his schoolmates straight out that transporting shells was not one bit less important, nor less dangerous, than reconnoitring or sending radiograms from behind enemy lines....

But then something happened that the lieutenant, so engrossed in his happy thoughts, never expected. All of a sudden, out of a clear sky, one of those terrible February blizzards that occur in the Dnieper regions hit them. A swirling cloud of snow enveloped the cars. A broad white sheet quivered in front of the headlights, blotting them out. The snow fell so thick that it was practically impossible to see through the windshield, to discern even the radiator cap, which looked as if it were trimmed with fluffy white rabbit fur.

"Time out for a sun bath," said Likhodayev, stopping the car which had come up, it seemed, against a solid wall of moving snow.

"Forward!" the lieutenant barked furiously, trying to take hold of the steering wheel.

"What do you mean, forward? This place is full of ditches. If we fall in, even a tractor won't be able to pull us out," the driver replied unmoved.

The lieutenant felt his insides go cold. He slung the strap of a strong flashlight over his

shoulder and jumped out of the car into the howling, flurrying darkness. Would they really have to stand still? The planes would also be stalled by weather like this. The batteries would be left without ammunition and the German tanks would pierce the ring!

The lieutenant went down on all fours and felt for the ruts under the wet, fluffy snow. Then he walked ahead, lighting the road with his flashlight, bending over to feel his way. Likhodeyev started the car, following the weak glimmer of the flashlight in the flurrying darkness. The whole column followed in this machine's tracks, which stood out black in the freshly driven snow. The storm roared, wailed, shrieked; new clouds kept piling up; sheets of snow were hurled underfoot, only to be snatched up with a howl and dragged over the fields. The storm kept knocking the lieutenant off his feet, pushing him in the back and stinging his face with icy needles. But he bent forward against the wind and kept advancing, slowly to be sure, but steadily, blazing a trail for the trucks through this fury of snow.

Then, with a final unburdening of snow, the storm stopped as suddenly as it had started. Again the sound of the cannonade became audible on both sides of the road and the

flares of nearby explosions could be seen. Stars studded the sky, like the sparks of rockets. The moon came out and bathed everything in its cold blue light.

The landscape was completely changed, as if someone had altered the stage-sets while the storm raged. Instead of water-soaked, black earth shining with a dull lustre in the moonlight, a bare white plain gleamed blueely as far as the eye could see. The road was gone. But just as travellers divine a caravan trail in the desert by the bones of humans and beasts protruding from the sand, so the drivers picked out the trail by the black skeletons of charred German materiel protruding from the snow.

The lieutenant tumbled into the cab of the head car, so tired he could hardly move. He was soaked with perspiration as though someone had just ducked him in warm water, sheepskin and all. Without stopping to take a breath, he asked Likhodeyev how many kilometres they had covered in the blizzard. It seemed to him they had gone a long way.

"About five or six," Likhodeyev replied impassively. Deftly turning the wheel, he drove the truck through a gauntlet of ugly iron skeletons, and with a driver's sixth sense

found the ruts under the snow. The shelling became louder. The trucks moved slowly, pushing their way with difficulty through the diagonal snowdrifts barring the road. Now and then, to the left or to the right, sometimes up in front, crimson flashes shot into the air. The lieutenant knew what that meant. But the idea of danger never even entered his head. Seeing that it was growing light, he began to calculate the distance left, dividing it by the cars' speed, in order to figure out whether they would arrive on time. He was so taken up with his calculations that he could not immediately grasp what had happened when the roar of a heavy explosion sounded so close that the truck almost turned over. There was a shatter of broken glass and Likhodeyev, falling back from the wheel, began to slip sideways off the seat.

The trucks stopped. Drivers came running up to the crippled car out of the greenish semidarkness of the frosty morning. They glanced through the broken glass of the cab and asked what had happened, offering advice to the lieutenant, who was deftly bandaging his companion's wound.

"Send them back to their cars.... Let's go, let's go," urged Likhodeyev, whom the lieutenant had propped up on the seat. "Is

the motor all right?... Will you manage yourself?"

The lieutenant, whose head ached and ears rang from the explosion, took the wheel, blew the horn, and the cars started moving. The column pushed stubbornly ahead, breaking a road for itself over the white plain where here and there black fountains of earth gushed forth and high brown umbrellas of smoke rose and hovered in the quiet frosty air.

Now the explosions could be heard even above the roar of the motors. More and more wounded were to be met along the road. Only about a dozen kilometres remained. The lieutenant once more began to feel elated.

But at this point the road was cut by a deep gulch. The bridge over which they had passed yesterday now hung in the air, an ugly piece of tangled steel above the gurgling water of the small, swift stream. Tanks had forded the stream to the right of the bridge and the lieutenant headed his car to that spot. Without stopping, it entered the stream, bumped over the stones, and churned through the water of the channel. But when it reached the other bank it suddenly stalled, and the lieutenant immediately realized that

it had become hopelessly stuck in the mud. Cold with dismay, he jerked the car convulsively a few times. The wheels only sank deeper into the mud. And the worst of it was that the head car barred the path of all the rest. The drivers ran up and crowded round the car. They put their shoulders to it, strained and pushed and tried to lift it. The motor raced and roared, the chains clanked, splashing the mud, the car jerked convulsively—and sank deeper into the mud.

“We’ll have to unload,” whispered Likhodayev who had come out of a spell of unconsciousness.

Unload? That meant at least an hour’s delay.

The sun was already high and they still had a good way to go. The hands of the clock on the car’s dashboard moved inexorably. Lieutenant Pastukhov suddenly felt unspeakably tired. He would have given a year of his life for every minute saved. Was unloading the only way out? Late.... They were late.... They had not carried out their orders....

He jumped out of the cab. The truck had sunk to its belly, as drivers say. The tired men stood dejectedly around it, wet, spattered with mud from head to toe, their arms

hanging limp at their sides. They looked at their lieutenant hopefully. What could be done?

Then suddenly all of them, as if in response to a command, lifted their heads and listened. They could hear a motor chugging somewhere beyond the ravine. Every one of the twenty-two men was looking up hopefully. The younger ones started clambering up the slope and the first ones who reached the top shouted exultantly:

“A tank, a tank!”

Nothing but a tank with its powerful motor and broad tread could get the column out of this hole. The sound grew louder, turning into a roar as a tank, whitewashed for camouflage, rounded the curve and appeared on the slope. It rumbled over the crest cautiously, like a heavy, powerful beast, then, spluttering and growling, began to descend to the stream. In the turret trap, visible to the waist, stood a heavy-set soldier wearing a cap with earflaps and a wide army sheepskin.

His middle-aged face was stern and forbidding, his lips were pressed tightly together, and his grey eyes glanced about sharply. The drivers immediately surrounded the tank.

"Pull us out, brother.... Help us out.... We've got an important assignment..." came from all sides.

The man's steel-grey eyes seemed scarcely to notice them as he kept looking around impatiently, apparently considering the best way to get past the car blocking the way.

"Help us out, brother, that's a good fellow.... I'll give you a week's tobacco 'ration... real, strong tobacco.... Or the full flask they issued before we left. Haven't taken a single swig out of it—no time. You can have the whole thing if you pull us out," the drivers tried to tempt him.

The shadow of a smile flitted across the man's face; it touched his tight lips and twinkled imperceptibly in the corners of his eyes. He shook his head in refusal. But the drivers had noticed the momentary softening of his face; they had perceived the simple humanity under his mask of stern inflexibility. They took heart and all started talking at once again.

"Help us out, friend, it won't hurt you any.... Is this the first time you've been on a frontline road?... Aren't you a soldier? Don't you know we've got to help each other out?... We're carrying shells, friend, shells, to the very heart of the battle, so to speak...."

Lieutenant Pastukhov jumped up onto the armour. He touched the tankman's shoulder:

"Comrade tankman, help us out. Listen! Our guns are dying down... the Germans will get through if we don't bring the ammunition... the commander of the front..." the lieutenant's eyes flashed as he pronounced the name of the well-known and much beloved general, "ordered us to deliver the shells by 2 p.m."

"No time. We're on our way to Front Headquarters on an important assignment," the tankman finally said, and bending down he shouted a command to someone inside. At that moment Pastukhov was struck by something familiar in his face. Yes, somewhere the lieutenant had seen that round face with the lines on the cheeks indicating a strong will; he had seen the penetrating gaze of those narrow, grey eyes. But there was no time to stop to think. The tank jerked forward, and with a roar, began to turn around, clearly intending to pass the stranded car.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself!" the lieutenant cried out, and in his ringing voice there was the sound of tears.

The last chance to deliver the shells on time was vanishing. What should they do? The lieutenant jumped off the tank and ran

out in front of it, barring its path. Looking up with eyes full of hatred at the man standing in the turret, he shouted:

“Over my dead body! Pull out that truck, do you hear?” And he lay down under the very treads in the dirty, wet, trampled snow. As if in obedience to a command, every one of his transport drivers lay down beside him. A barrier of living bodies obstructed the steel giant’s path to the ford. The tank gave an angry, perplexed roar and halted before this vulnerable, but insurmountable obstacle. The man in the turret looked down, his blond eyebrows twitching. The men lay in the mud, their whole bearing indicating that they would sooner be run over than let the tank pass. A warm, but reserved smile touched the man’s lips. Bending over, he issued an order to the tank crew, climbed out of the turret, and jumped into the snow. Stamping his feet and stretching his legs, he affectionately and with unconcealed interest watched the grumbling drivers get up off the ground and shake themselves. And again the lieutenant felt there was something very familiar about the tall, heavy-set tankman with the stern, strong-featured face. But the men were already hooking the tow chains onto the tank. Work was in full swing.

The tall man in the sheepskin jacket walked up and down the riverbank impatiently watching the tank pull one car after another up the bank. But there was no irritation in his glance now, and the look he turned on the young lieutenant with the black fuzz on an upper lip which had never yet been shaved, at the bright, girlish colour flushing on his thin cheeks, was filled with pleasure. A short, blond, dapper lieutenant-colonel jumped out of the tank's hatch. He squinted up at the sun, then looked in surprise at what was going on at the stream crossing. At that moment there was a rustle overhead and the ground belched up a fountain of earth and dirty water. The man in the short coat merely glanced in the direction of the explosion and continued his pacing. The lieutenant-colonel rushed up to Lieutenant Pastukhov.

"Have you gone mad.... Stop this business immediately.... Let the tank pass," he hissed angrily at the lieutenant who was standing at attention before him. He glanced anxiously out of the corner of his eye at the man Pastukhov and his drivers had taken for a tankman. "Don't you see that's the Commander of the Front? He's hurrying to his observation post on a tank because all the cars have got stuck in this damned mud."

The Commander of the Front! Now the lieutenant understood why the face looked familiar to him; he had seen it many times in the newspapers. This was the famous general whose order he had so inopportunistically flaunted in his face. And this commander, who was executing the brilliant Stalin plan to encircle an enormous enemy grouping, had been delayed by Lieutenant Pastukhov, compelled to get out of his tank, threatened in his own name, and subjected to danger from the firing around. What would happen?

Well, nothing could be done about it now. The tank was pulling out the last truck. Let the dapper lieutenant-colonel fume to his heart's content. Let them arrest him, send him to a penal battalion, anything they wished, but the order would be carried out; the shells would arrive in time. Smoothing out the folds of his army coat beneath the belt and straightening his cap, Lieutenant Pastukhov boldly approached the commander. He stood at attention and saluted:

"Comrade Army General—Lieutenant Pastukhov, motor transport commander reporting. . . . I beg your pardon, I didn't recognize you. I'm prepared to take any punishment due me for wilfully delaying you."

The commander turned sharply on his heels. It was hard to guess his thoughts from the expression on his calm, immobile face. But in the narrow grey eyes the lieutenant caught an amused twinkle.

"What's your unit?" the commander asked in a low voice.

Made all warm and soft inside by an upsurge of exultant joy, the lieutenant clipped out the number of his unit.

"Tell your general that he has good soldiers and officers under him. Tell him that the Commander of the Front offers his personal thanks to you and your men for excellent service," and, glancing at the dapper lieutenant-colonel, the commander said to him, "Write down the lieutenant's name. Report it as soon as we arrive...."

Firmly pressing Lieutenant Pastukhov's hand in his own rough, strong one, the commander jumped onto the tank as lightly as a boy, and the huge machine started forward. The lieutenant rushed over to the head car, jumped into the cab and kissed the pale, suffering face of Likhodeyev, who was smiling affectionately at him.

The cars followed in the tank's tracks. And although explosions sent up fountains of earth to the left and to the right, although

Likhodeyev kept grinding his teeth in a new spell of unconsciousness, although the speedometer indicated no more than fifteen, the lieutenant no longer doubted that he would deliver his cargo on time, that not a single German would escape from the Korsun-Shechenkovsky ring, that the battle on the Dnieper would be won, and that when Nina read his letter she would not laugh at him, and that maybe some day she would even give her heart to him, an army hack-driver, the most modest and most faithful of the "Three Musketeers."



It Came True

ONE DAY at the end of December 1941 we received a telegram from our editors, asking us for a story about how one of our advancing units spent New Year's Eve. The assignment did not seem a very difficult one. Although the Soviet Army's first winter offensive was at its height, our advancing troops had not made much progress since the capture of Kalinin.

One clear, crisp night, bright with twinkling stars and gleaming snow, we set out over familiar forest roads which had been rolled to a glittering smoothness by the wheels of advancing batteries. In about an hour and a half we reached the forward positions. At that time they were not marked in any particular manner, but could be recognized by the near-

by glow of conflagrations, the chatter of tommy guns and the ceaseless glimmer of bluish German flares.

Everything was on the move. The snow, frozen as brittle as porcelain, crunched under the infantrymen's feet. Trucks with clanging chains roared uphill. Tractors chugged along, dragging huge pieces of ordnance; exhausted horses covered with hoarfrost snorted and wheezed as they pulled the guns. The drivers' hoarse cries rang out: "Get on there, get on!" The telegraph poles crackled with cold, and torn, twisted wires moaned in the frost.

In the tumult of the rapidly developing offensive it proved impossible to locate headquarters, since they were constantly being shifted. The narrow forest roads were completely jammed with the supply wagons of advancing regiments. In some places the traffic was blocked for many kilometres. Finding ourselves stuck in the tail of one such jam, we got out and made our way on foot to a wayside village, or rather to a huge heap of glowing ashes, at the embers of which frozen infantrymen and drivers of horses and machines were warming themselves. We entered the only cottage still standing; the interior indicated that this had once been

the nursery for kolkhoz children. Here we decided to celebrate New Year's Eve.

The cottage was packed with army men. There was no room to lie down on the floor, or even to sit. The men who came in to warm up or have a smoke were jammed up against each other, forming a solid wall. The entranceway was also crowded, and from it came the deep vigorous roar of many men snoring. The Russian stove and sleeping bunks were occupied by sturdy Siberian skiers in hooded white camouflage capes. Through the blue strata of *makhorka* smoke they looked like ghosts. Their skis were stacked on end against the house and the sentry guarding them said that the battalion was going into attack this very night.

The propinquity of battle did not upset them; on the contrary, it seemed to stimulate these seasoned soldiers, who had seen plenty of fighting. They sat crosslegged on the huge, roomy stove, around a clearing in the middle where they were busily laying out their victuals.

A wounded infantryman with a broken arm bandaged to a piece of lath, appeared in the doorway. They helped him up onto the stove, then they moved a few of their own men to the bunks above and lifted up a woman

with an infant protruding like a young kangaroo from the slit in her unbuttoned, patched sheepskin. From where we were standing we saw them joking and laughing as they solicitously seated her against the wall. How kind and sad were the eyes of the soldiers as they looked down upon the flushed face of the sleeping child!

“Welcome to our camp, Comrade Commander; excuse me, can’t see the insignia under your coat,” said one of the lively white ghosts from the stove, apparently addressing me. “We’re rich today. Celebrating New Year’s Eve with a regular feast.”

For those hard times the Siberians were indeed rich. The two clean towels before them were spread with three aluminium flasks, a heap of sliced backfat, chunks of sausage frozen so hard they had to be chopped, and brown cookies baked with sour cream according to all the rules of peacetime; true, they were dry and slightly mouldy, but they had the pleasant sour smell of rye.

“Got some parcels. The girls back home sent ’em to us for the holidays,” explained one of the skiers, a rather short sergeant with scanty, upturned moustaches that looked like mice tails. “Go ahead and help yourself—sent with the best of feelings, from the bottom of

the heart, so to speak. I've got the letter here—maybe you'd like to read it, eh? Make the food taste better."

The bright ray of his tiny flashlight illuminated a frayed and dirty sheet of paper which had evidently been passed from hand to hand, and read and reread many times.

"Dear soldiers,

"From the bottom of our hearts we wish you a Happy New Year and hope that it will bring you historic victories over accursed fascism. We are sending you this modest gift. Eat and drink to your own health and think of us girls whom you do not know.... We are also doing what we can to hasten victory. Exactly what we are doing must be kept a secret, but that is not important, because you see the results at the front.... Accept our very best regards.

"From a group of unknown but devoted Stakhanovites of the March Eighth Co-operative, City of Kirov."

The sergeant read the letter with expression. He evidently knew the contents so well he hardly glanced at the paper. Then he folded the letter, shoved it into his billfold, put

the latter into his pocket and glanced at his watch.

“The last minutes of this year, a plague on it, are ticking away. Well, is everything ready?”

He surveyed the New Year’s “table.”

The ski unit had decided to eat the contents of the parcel at a general gathering that New Year’s Eve before the attack; as for the individual articles in the parcel—an embroidered tobacco pouch and warm fur-lined mittens—they drew lots in the army way. The tobacco pouch fell to a young boy who had never touched tobacco in all his life, and the mittens to a soldier who had just received a pair of fine fur gloves with his winter clothing.

Neither would consent under any circumstances to part with the articles they had so little use for, and the last minutes of the old year passed in lively joking and banter on this subject. The sergeant rolled up the sleeves of his jacket as he watched the slowly moving minute hand of his watch. The house shook from the nearby cannonade, yet everybody could distinctly hear the watch ticking.

“Ready! The old year’s weighed anchor, here’s to the new year!” he finally cried.

The stoppers of the flasks were unscrewed, and the flasks went the rounds, each man in turn taking two "middle-sized swallows," as pre-arranged.

The first toast, as is the custom among Soviet people, was drunk to Comrade Stalin, to his good health and long life. Then we drank to victory, to success in the coming engagement, to the health of those who sent the package, and in general to the women who were thinking of the men at the front at this moment.

Each time a toast was proclaimed the flasks moved round the circle. Drinks were offered the wounded man and the woman, who, as it turned out, was the only inhabitant of the village. A few hours earlier she had returned from somewhere beyond Kalinin to find a heap of glowing embers on the site of her house.

It was becoming noisier. Collars of quilted jackets and coats were unbuttoned, beads of sweat appeared on the men's foreheads and their eyes began to sparkle; and to the tips of their tongues rose the thoughts they kept buried deep down in their hearts during the hard days of this offensive, thoughts which came to them when they went into attack, when they lay down to sleep next to the camp-

fires, but which they seldom expressed—thoughts kept for themselves alone.

“Listen, boys, listen, I want to say something, hey, listen, you devils, stop that noise. . . . Ever since last week when I first landed on our territory where fascists had been, I haven’t been able to sleep—you can believe me or not, just as you like,” said the sergeant who, it turned out, was the unit commander. “I’ve lost my peace of mind, fellows. I close my eyes and see everything in flames all around. I hear fires crackling in the frost. Just like the real thing. I pull my earflaps down—after all, you’ve got to sleep, to keep going. . . . But it’s no use at all. . . . I see skirts like her—pardon me, women like her—our women, and little children dead in the snow. . . . No, wait a minute, listen, let me finish. . . . And I keep thinking how can this be, what’s it for? What’s the reason the fascists are running rampant on our land? Why are they burning our cottages? Do our cottages keep them from fighting? Is it women, and old people and little children who are licking them now? Then what the hell do they have to murder them for? Eh? That’s what’s on my mind, boys. . . .”

Out of the smoke-filled darkness came a confused chatter of voices.

"The sergeant's got going. . . . What a question: they're fascists, that's why."

"That's no answer. That's nothing new: fascists—we know they're fascists."

"I suppose the curs know that as long as a single one of our houses is standing on the ground, as long as a single one of our women can bear a child, they won't be able to lord it over the world."

"They're running rampant because they're not as strong as they thought. They sense their end, I'm telling you."

"What's the use of shooting off your mouth about it? Got to smash 'em, that's all. You'd do better to send the flask over this way, sergeant, so we can drink another toast to victory—that'd make sense. Everything's clear enough, so far as I can see."

The sergeant's hoarse voice now dropped to its deepest register, filling the whole house and drowning out all other sounds. He raised himself to his knees and peered into the smoky darkness, and there was so much passionate hatred in his eyes that one might suppose he saw Hitler and his henchmen standing there in front of him, lashing the land into a wilderness in the frenzy of their impotence.

The skiers tried to calm him down, but the little sergeant pushed them back with a strength one would never have thought he possessed.

"Stop, don't interrupt! I'm going into battle—maybe I'll be killed today—let me unburden my heart before the fight. Is this war I ask you? Is it war to blow up cities, burn houses, leave people like her with the little baby," he pointed to the woman nursing the child, who was peacefully sucking in its sleep, "leave people like her in the snow without a crust of bread or a roof over her head? Is that the way to fight?... Oh, if I could only lay my hands on them, I'd sink my teeth into their throats."

This young man, who a minute ago had seemed so simple and ordinary, had evidently given expression to thoughts constantly in the minds of the others—thoughts which they could not and did not like to express.

An approving buzz of many voices came from the floor, from the thick hot darkness, from the doorway where shadowy figures could be seen, or rather divined, by their heavy breathing.

"You said it, that's right!"

"Give it to them, Siberia, you're talking straight!"

"Yes, fellows, that's what I think too: if I weren't a Communist, if I didn't have a Party card in my pocket, honest to God, I wouldn't bother taking prisoners!"

"Party card! And what about the non-Party people? We're all of us Soviet people. What has a prisoner got to do with it—he's laid down arms. Siberia is talking sense over there—we've got to get at their leaders."

"And we will, don't you think?"

"It's a long way to go, a long, long way."

In reply to this the sergeant went on confidently:

"We'll get there all right, if only they don't hide in some crack, the vermin—we'll turn Berlin upside down to find them, we will...."

The noise of a door opening down below was heard and someone's voice burst into the room in a cloud of frosty vapour and a blast of fresh air smelling of snow:

"Hey there, anyone from the Seventh Ski here? The major has given orders to line up."

The sergeant cut his sentence short. The skiers began to get ready to leave, tightening their belts, tying the tapes of their loose capes. By the light of a flashlight they collected the remains of the New Year's Eve feast,

wrapped them up in one of the gift towels and handed the parcel to the woman.

"Here, take this, mother. We don't need it."

The winner of the tobacco pouch offered it to the wounded man.

"You have more use for it. You smoke, I see...."

Then the sergeant collected all the letters to be mailed, including a collective reply to the Kirov girls who had sent them the New Year's gifts. He gave them to me and asked me to drop them in the box for army mail. They were setting out on a distant raid and anything might happen.

Before leaving, the sergeant ran his flashlight over the faces of his men, who were pushing their way with difficulty through the crowded house. The faces wore the usual expression of businesslike concern. The soldiers straightened the tommy guns on their chests, removed the rags in which the locks were carefully wrapped, pulled their hoods down to their eyebrows.

As he passed me the sergeant said:

"What do you think, Comrade Commander, will we manage to get our hands on them some day—the Hitlerites—and..." he clenched his teeth and said no more.

In the darkness I found his big, rough hand and silently pressed it. He sighed in reply.

"Ekh, if only we could manage!" and with these words he disappeared in the cloud of cold vapour which had again poured through the door from outside where the skis were already creaking sharply and orders could be heard being called out.

For a long time afterwards voices buzzed in the packed cottage. Soldiers came and went. New arrivals would ask what the discussion was about and everybody agreed that what the Siberian had said before the attack was right and just....

Since then we have walked and ridden and flown over many miles of tangled, endless frontline roads in pursuit of the enemy. In the final analysis, all these roads converged at Berlin. But wherever this road of battle ran—through the ashes of burnt villages in the Kalinin area, through the noble ruins of Stalingrad, over the shell-pitted earth of Oryol, through the plundered, devastated Ukraine, along the Volga, Dnieper, Dniester, Pruth, Vistula, Oder, Elbe, to the Spree itself. And everywhere we have heard Soviet people express their hope for justice so vividly expressed by the sergeant that New Year's Eve.

The further the front line retreated, the more persistent became this hope.

In a great singlehanded fight the Soviet Army broke the backbone of fascism; it fought its way over thousands of kilometres to hoist the flag of triumph on the skeleton of the Reichstag. And then it searched for the fascist ringleaders in the sooty ruins of devastated Berlin, in the cellars of shattered Dresden, in the ashes of Leipzig, in the debris of Königsberg, searched for them all over Germany—searched for them, and found them.

It had come true!... There they sat in the prisoners' dock in ancient Nuremberg. The frosted, elongated bulbs framing the ceiling shed a light as bright as day on the uniforms and gowns of the judges, sitting in state on a raised platform under the four flags of the victorious powers, on the fantastic coiffures of the stenographers, on the walls of malachite and black carved oak, on the white kettle-shaped tin hats of the American soldiers guarding the prisoners, on the open notebooks, fountain pens and pencils of the Press section.

In a rectangular enclosure behind a black wall of lawyers for the defence sat those who were hated by all honest people on the earth, hated as though they were their own person-

at enemies. There they sat, so mediocre in appearance, in crumpled suits, with crumpled, commonplace, vulgar faces. It was even strange to think that these were the people who had imagined themselves the rulers of the world, who had drenched half the globe in blood and tortured millions of people to death.

Day after day as they listened to the narration of their crimes they chewed the lunches they had not finished in the intermission, stretched languidly, talked to each other, read fresh newspapers behind the backs of the lawyers, scribbled in notebooks, erasing mistakes with German meticulousness, passed notes to their attorneys, exchanged earphones. They seemed quite at home in the shameful dock. And everybody was amazed to see how utterly petty and insignificant they were! When cross-examined they denied everything. When pushed to the wall, cornered by material evidence, they would admit the facts without even a blush: "Yes, that was so, but it slipped my mind. . . ." What nonentities!

It became tiresome to listen to the endless court proceedings. One millionth of what these men had done was more than sufficient to hang them. Even the judges concealed their yawns with difficulty. The Press seats were frequently vacant. But then something happened

that rushed in like a whirlwind upon the monotonous months of boredom at the court session. The head Soviet prosecutor, a plain man in the uniform of the Ministry of Justice, ascended the rostrum. Opening the folder of papers before him, he uttered in a rather hollow voice:

“In the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in the name of the whole Soviet people....”

It was as if the heavy rumble of thunder presaging a storm had rolled over arid steppe-land, lying languid in the sun; as if a blast of invigorating wind had torn into the hall and blown the veneer of boredom off all faces. The judges pricked up their ears; the old black-gowned Frenchman, De Fabre, bent forward, his chest pressing against the table, his hand cupping his ear, all attention. He wanted to hear not only the translation transmitted by earphone, he wanted to hear the Russian voice of the prosecutor too. The lawyers for the defence in their monkish gowns began to squirm in their seats and became tense, like soldiers in a trench before a decisive attack. The Press section was suddenly very crowded. Pencils and pens began to fly over paper. An American correspondent, a huge fellow whose army uniform made him

look like an inflated baby squeezed into too small a suit, had come running from the bar and stood stock-still in the doorway, a sandwich in his mouth and a notebook in his hand.

"In the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics!"

These words were said very simply, without courtroom pomp, in a low, steady voice. But this phrase shook the accused. They instinctively began to wriggle in their seats and seemed to shrink; they moved closer together in the far corner, like sheep during a storm.

Göring in his exceedingly wide, bluish suede uniform, which flapped on him like on a hanger, started up, paled and straightened, as if he had been struck. An involuntary grimace distorted his big, froglike mouth. Hess stretched his immobile snake's head even higher. Evidently he wanted to assume an ironic smile, but the smile was a failure; he merely bared his teeth and this made him look all the more like a death's-head already beginning to rot. Keitel, on the other hand, pulled in his head so that his wrinkled neck rippled like that of a turtle. His neighbour, Ribbentrop, who had become altogether mangy since the trial began, pressed his whitened lips together in an expression of martyr-

dom and closed his eyes with weariness, almost in a faint. The fat, smoothly shaven cheeks of Rosenberg, the actor, became sunken. Mumbling something to himself, Hitler's representative "in the East" began to crack his knuckles nervously, while Poland's executioner, Hans Frank, a lawyer by profession who had probably mentally passed his own death sentence and become reconciled to it, swept the frightened company with a cynical glance and burst into a malicious laugh.

"In the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics!"

It did not seem as if these words which galvanized the hall had been uttered by the solid, fair-haired man in the uniform of the Ministry of Justice, but by the Soviet people, who had invisibly accompanied him into the rostrum.

And it seemed to me that behind the back of the Soviet prosecutor, in this hall bright with artificial light, stood the people I knew, people whom I had met at different times in different places all along the vast front: the Velikiye Luki kolkhoznik Matvei Kuzmin; the little private of the Guards Mikhail Sinitsky, who had run away from a military school to go on fighting; the Moldavian grape-grower

Yurko Tarakul, who had succeeded in turning an ordinary house on a street corner into an impregnable fortress; the Ukrainian peasant woman Ulyana Belograd, who had sacrificed her family, children, and home in order to save a tank regiment's banner; the old scout Uncle Cherednikov; the sapper Nikolai Kharitonov, who blew up bridges and dams, roads and houses so expertly and had such an unbearable longing for peaceful building. Among those who stood invisible behind the Soviet prosecutor was the man from my home town, the former textile mill worker from Kalinin, the Czechoslovak partisan Konstantin Gorelkin; the slim girl with the poetic nickname "Birchtree," who had the fortitude to sacrifice for her country everything she loved and cherished; the Stalingrad pontoon builder Isidor Fominykh who spent his brief hours of rest at the front practising to become a sniper; the Kazakh scholar Malik Gabdullin, who in his own lifetime had become the hero of folksongs and tales; the splendid girl Maria Shevchuk, the favourite nurse of the Cossack division; and many, many other Soviet people—my fellow citizens, modest heroes of this war, people whose skill, determination, solidarity and infinite love of country broke the might of fascism.

And I remembered as clearly as if I had seen him only yesterday, the Siberian sergeant whom we had met at the dawn of our first offensive. His dream had come true, the dream he had voiced so passionately that New Year's Eve, an hour before going into battle. Invisible they stood here in this solemn hall—great and simple Soviet people who, in the name of their country, demanded that fascism be wiped out.

Our dreams and plans always come true. And this one was no exception. The Soviet prosecutor indicted fascism in the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.




A Christmas Party

THE INCIDENTS in the following story, with which I want to bring to an end these tales of the Patriotic War, also took place in Nuremberg.

About four hundred newspaper and radio correspondents came from all countries of the world to attend the Nuremberg trial. The American authorities set up a Press Camp in the enormous, extremely ugly palace of the pencil king, Johann Faber, one of the few buildings in the city which had survived allied air raids. This was probably the noisiest camp on earth. There was lots of work, talk, and argument in all the languages and dialects of the world, and people frequently did not understand one another, either in the literal or the figurative sense of the word.

One day towards the end of December a big Christmas tree, decorated in the Ameri-

can way with nothing but glittering curly tinsel, appeared in the cold, spacious marble drawing room of the Press Camp. The bleak palace, which by that time we all hated heartily, was filled with the pungent odour of pine, stirring up memories of childhood. This tree immediately upset the already fixed, very noisy and bustling mode of life in the quarters of the world press. Here was a breath from the distant past, from home and country, for which one always longs so acutely in foreign lands.

That evening it was unusually quiet in the room adjoining the drawing room—the work room—which on ordinary days buzzed like a hive from morning till night with the regular, busy hum of dozens of typewriters. The international telephones were silent. Two boys wearing the caps and uniforms of rival world telegraph agencies were on duty in the hall below. Ordinarily they could hardly cope with the heap of telegrams being sent to all countries of the world, but today they sat together on the gilt throne of some bankrupt *Kurfürst*, which the pencil king had bought to satisfy his vanity, and played dominoes with zest, slapping the pieces down on the knees of a marble Venus.

In the dim, smoke-filled barroom, however, it was crowded, and in the huge dining

room a Negro jazz band played boisterously, without respite, while the world press of all nationalities executed various intricate dance steps between the tables.

At first everything seemed to go smoothly. Several officers and generals of the British and American armies had come to the Press Christmas party. As always, the Soviet delegation sat in the southern corner of the hall at its regular tables. Several Englishmen and Americans sat down at our table, for in those days it was considered an honour at the Press Camp to spend an evening in the company of Soviet people, at the "Russian end," as it was called.

The tall, stained-glass windows which the pencil king, who aspired to pass for an aristocrat, had decorated with tasteless scenes from the days of knighthood, quivered in their lancet frames. There was the sound of hundreds of shuffling feet. Bright-coloured confetti snowed down upon us from the galleries, getting caught in our hair and falling into our wine glasses, twisted paper streamers entangled themselves about the dancers' legs, and vari-coloured cotton balls spun from table to table. All this was sufficiently vulgar and boring. The only thing really interesting and worth while at this Christmas party was

the Negro band. It played furiously, never stopping for rest.

The black-faced musicians wearing American soldiers' uniforms with numerous gold stripes on their sleeves, testimonials that they had travelled a long path of battle in this war, and colourful ribbons of medals over their tunic pockets, proofs that they had fought well, blew their horns, trumpets, saxophones with all their might, banged on drums of some strange make, furiously pounded the keys of the grand piano, the tortoise shell boxes, the floor and the music stands; they dexterously manipulated some sort of whistles, rattles and metal brushes which emitted the most unimaginable sounds. And they played with such abandon, such zest, skill, and ingenuousness, and their eyes sparkled so, that it was evident the music and holiday hubbub afforded them no less pleasure than it did the dancers and the listeners.

The conductor was particularly interesting. He was handsome, graceful as a reed, with a delicately chiselled, intellectual face, and while leading the orchestra he managed to perform on all instruments in succession. He hummed all the time, tapped out the rhythm with his foot, and seemed to be bubbling

over with fun, giving himself up entirely to the noisy, tempestuous, folk melody.

"Okay!... Very good.... How d'you say that in your language? Karosho?" said our table companion, smacking his lips. He was a well-known American radio commentator, a big, heavy, good-natured fellow, whose flabby arms, neck, whole body, strained and poured out of his army uniform like dough. He was studying Russian and never missed an opportunity to "shine" by pronouncing a Russian word. "Oh! A maestro? Not right? Maister? That right? That black boy is luxus.... No? Luchy maister.... Is that right? Po-russky vierno?" he said mispronouncing the Russian words horribly. And proud that he had succeeded in talking Russian so fluently, he winked at the whole table, laughed out loud and poured himself another glass of whiskey.

The band's music was so contagious that, unable to contain himself, Judge Jackson, the head of the American prosecution, rose from his table and danced off with his secretary, a serious looking matron in horn-rimmed spectacles. And, to an accompaniment of approving laughter and whistling, one of the generals, a typical Yankee with silvery hair and cheeks as red as a child's, took a chair

for a partner and began to demonstrate how the foxtrot is danced in the different states of America.

Our table companion, the expert in the Russian language, had gone altogether soft with the heat, whiskey and music. Beating time with his feet, shod in huge army boots, the sweat streaming down his face, he mumbled sentimentally in a mixture of broken Russian and English:

"Mr. Russians.... Here's to Russky tovarishch. I'm a good old friend of yours," he poked his sausage-like finger at his chest and then pointed it at the dancing judge, and at the general spinning around with the chair. "Amerikanski democracy is luxus. Right? Luchy—the best, finest, democracy. Freedom, ha-ha! Okay! Oho!"

We watched the Negro jazz band. While performing with great professional skill, the musicians succeeded in preserving delightful spontaneity of execution. Somehow this characteristic closely allied their music with our folk art and invested it with a special charm for us. But the band stopped playing, and it was as if an electric current had been switched off in the musicians. Breathing heavily like winded horses, they wiped the sweat streaming down their faces with their

broad palms. It occurred to the Soviet journalists, to several at the same time, to express their heartfelt thanks for the talented performance. We went up to the dais and began to shake the musicians' big, hot, purple hands.

And then a strange thing happened. A tense hush suddenly came over the hall. Everybody was looking at us in silence: the Americans sullenly, not concealing their surprise and disgust; the British coldly, enquiringly aloof; the French, ironically sympathetic, intimating: we know all this is nonsense and prejudice; however, does it pay to go against the customs of one's hosts, even if they are so ridiculous? A tall, bald-headed Czech journalist, however, who had been in a fascist prison together with Julius Fučík and had escaped the hangman's noose by a hairsbreadth, applauded us from afar, where he stood next to a column. Two Yugoslav correspondents with partisan stars pinned on their new suits joined us, and a short, dark Bulgarian, a well-known writer and musician in his native land, jumped up onto the platform and began to embrace the musicians.

You should have seen the Negroes then! Their broad, open, frank faces shone with childlike pleasure. Their white teeth gleamed

as they squeezed our hands so hard our fingers stuck together and our knuckles cracked. Yes, these certainly were fine fellows!

The silence in the hall was growing more tense. Oh, so that's it? All right, let them! We invited several of the Negro musicians to join us at the "Russian end." No sooner had they reached our tables than the Americans sitting with us demonstratively rose and left. The fat radio commentator whose fleshy face had been one big grin an instant ago, flung the Negroes a murderous look and hastily elbowed his way out of the hall. A moment later he appeared in the doorway accompanied by the Press Camp chief, Major Dean, and an officer from army headquarters, at the sight of whom our Negro guests sprang up, their faces turning an ashen grey. Smiling politely, the major begged our pardon for having to break up our party, and angrily growled to the musicians: "Beat it."

They went—frightened, abashed, like children who had done something naughty. Only the handsome conductor finished his glass of wine with dignity, bade us goodbye, and then walked away proudly and unhurriedly, his whole bearing stressing that he was submitting to brute force; straight, slim and graceful in his American army uniform, he walked

through a gauntlet of sneering, unfriendly, perplexed looks.

The band struck up again. Couples began to dart round the hall, a shower of confetti poured from the galleries, coloured wads of paper streamers flashed through the air as they unrolled. Everything was as before. But a feeling of dejection, of ennui and disgust had come over me, as sometimes happens when you go behind scenes of a fairy-like ballet during the intermission and see the sackcloth side of the rosebushes, the sweating bald pate under the dancer's wig, and the wrinkles on the ballerina's neck which no cosmetics can any longer conceal. Only this was worse. I went out into the marble drawing room where the Christmas tree stood, and there I saw an old friend of mine, Sergei Krushinsky. He was standing at the tree all alone with a closed portable typewriter in his hand. An indefatigable journalist, he had just rattled off a dispatch to his newspaper in the silence of the empty workroom and was about to send it off by telegraph.

"You know what I was thinking of?" he asked, with a tender, dreamy smile. "I was thinking of...."

"Our correspondents' New Year's party in Novo-Bridino," I finished for him.

He nodded silently. I had been thinking of the same thing. That event, happening so long ago and leaving a permanent warm spot in my heart, now stood out vividly in my memory.

It was the end of the hard and turbulent year of 1942. Alexander Alexandrovich Fadeyev, who had recently arrived at our front with a *Pravda* correspondent's card, the *Krasnaya Zvezda* correspondent and myself, had just returned from Velikiye Luki where the last stage of heavy and prolonged fighting for the town was coming to an end. We had travelled more than one hundred kilometres that stormy day over broken, ice-crust-ed frontline roads.

The correspondents of the Kalinin front were billeted in the little village of Novo-Bridino and lived all together in a building which formerly had housed the primary school and which, for some reason, we ironically called the "White House." The house was not white at all; it was grey from age and bad weather, very dilapidated and full of chinks. The press was cooped up in a big, cold classroom partitioned off by makeshift screens and cupboards. We shared the classroom with a sick schoolteacher and her numerous brood of children, and with several

kolkhoz families who had moved in when the retreating Germans burned down their houses. Only the correspondents who had been here some time had cots. The guests, dozens of whom, by the way, had swarmed here to be present at the capture of Velikiye Luki, slept on straw strewn on the floor. But we lived peaceably and were very friendly, fully justifying the Russian saying: "Crowded but cosy."

The early winter twilight was already falling when our long-suffering car finally pushed its nose through the last snowdrift and stopped before the porch of the "White House." We burst into the room, enveloped in clouds of vapour. The whole group of journalists garbed in quilted jackets, felt boots, with sheepskins thrown over their shoulders and hands thrust deep into their pockets, were huddled around a small iron stove. The stove was so hot sparks flared up and died out on its glowing sides, which were humming with the tension. The first thing that struck us was the unusual silence that reigned in our quarters, an oppressive and dismal silence broken only by the fitful roar of the fire, the creaking of the red-hot stove-pipe and the dry rustle of snow as it fell on the windowpanes. There was a faraway

expression on all faces. No one asked us how we'd made out on our trip or what was new in Velikiye Luki. Silently room was made for us at the fire, and, succumbing to the general mood, we also silently stretched out our frozen hands to it. And immediately our thoughts flew far away from the battles, from this snowed-in little house, to the unknown places to which our families had been evacuated. And we wondered how the children, growing up without us, looked, and how many new wrinkles worry had etched on our wives' faces, and whether they had managed the luxury of even a tiny tree.

The dying flames roared, hissed and thrashed about in the little stove. The wind moaned in the chimney. Sad thoughts passed slowly through our minds. The quiet faces of our comrades were indistinct in the grey dusk of the deepening twilight; the pungent smoke of *makhorka* wreathed transparently to the ceiling. And somewhere behind our backs, guessed at rather than seen, were the incredibly ragged youngsters who lived in this house, usually so noisy and vociferous, but today also hushed, except for an occasional snuffle. The children included a round-faced, snub-nosed little boy with steel-grey eyes, whom we nicknamed Vanya No. 1: there was Vanya

No. 2, who looked very much like him, except that he was smaller; there was a sturdy four-year-old whom we had nicknamed Yermak Timofeyevich because of his robustness and grit; and his little sister, a pert, golden-haired, three-year-old young lady who had an altogether complicated nickname—Silyon Portyankin, and lots more children, small and middle-sized. The silent presence of these little folk made our longing for home even more poignant.

The fire went out. The red-hot stove turned blue and then the colour of lead. A heavy, smoky darkness filled the room. And then someone, I don't now remember who, broke the silence:

"Listen, brothers," he said meditatively, "what if we get a tree and have a party?"

That decided the fate of the evening. We all came out of our doze at once. Everybody got excited and busy and all began to talk at once, like at an old-fashioned village meeting. The big kerosene lamp made out of a flattened shell case was lighted and energetic preparations began.

By order of the head of the correspondents' corps, photo-reporter Seryozha Korshunov and I took an axe and a flashlight and went out to look for a fir tree in the

forest which rustled at our very doorstep. And while we were beating a path through the high snowdrifts, which gleamed fantastically in the bright ray of our flashlight, and searching for a suitable tree in the silent, frozen blackness of the sullen forest, a noisy bustle reigned in the "White House."

Everyone contributed what he had in the way of food to the common store. Our drivers, headed by the lame kolkhoznik Yegor Vasilyevich who could turn his hand to anything, knocked together a huge, long table in the hall. Alexander Fadeyev, who had volunteered to head the "tree trimmers," unexpectedly revealed amazing resourcefulness. He made the officers empty their bags and field cases of razor blades, eau-de-Cologne stoppers, extra brass buttons, and even of reserve cartridges—in a word, of everything that would glitter and sparkle.

Sitting on his cot, his legs drawn up under him, he fussily sorted the treasures brought him, and then the correspondents attached threads to them. Suggestions poured in from all sides. Cigarettes! They could be tied to the ends of branches and would do for candles. Individual first-aid kits! There was sterilized cotton in them. Hyposulphite—the photographers had plenty of that—could be

sprinkled on the cotton, and there you had sparkling snow.

We spent about an hour and a half in the dark pushing through snowdrifts in search of a tree. When we finally tumbled into the house, exhausted, perspiring, in our ice-stiffened sheepskins and felt boots full of snow, the preparations were in full swing.

The pooling of provisions had yielded a considerable supply of modest food and sweets. All of it was laid on the table in crude paper bags of our own construction. In the kitchen the drivers were opening cans of fish from their rations, cleaning salt herring and slicing turnips with a carpenter's plane.

But the tree trimmers outshone everyone else. In front of Fadeyev lay a heap of glittering gewgaws from which he was selecting only the best. When the fir tree was finally mounted on a block of wood and trimmed, we all stood speechless with admiration. It was marvelous indeed, adorned with cartridges, twisted garlands of telegraph tape, and cotton wool sprinkled with gleaming hypo-sulphite.

All the correspondents had enthusiastically joined in this lively work while the children, whom we had chased out of the room in good time, peered through the crack in the

door, watching us with bated breath. It gave us infinite pleasure to see their faces, scoured for the occasion, shining with excitement. At last the doors were thrown open and the children poured into the "hall." And with an enchanting glitter and aroma, our modest Press tree welcomed these children who until so recently had been living under the Germans, trembling in dugouts, bomb shelters, or slit trenches in the gardens, who had forgotten what it was to smile or talk out loud.

From beneath the tree crawled a bear, which roared and lumbered towards the children. True, it bore little resemblance to a beast, this makeshift bear of ours with its shaggy red hair, its sheepskin worn inside out, and its fur aviation boots. According to the unanimous declaration of our little guests he looked very much like their beloved Apap Amamysh, as they called the Sovinformburo correspondent. But he fulfilled his duties irreproachably. He roared horrifically, crawled on all fours, danced in a ring with the children, and even played pickaback with the very little ones!

And with no less enthusiasm, prominent journalists, well-known photo-correspondents and their devoted drivers danced with the children around the tree that day. Everybody

sang, danced, fooled about, and it would be hard to say to whom the little tree with its unmelting icicles gave the greatest pleasure that night, our little guests, for whom it was a symbol of release from German oppression and a return to their own beloved Soviet world, or us officers.

When the party was at its height I went outside for a breath of fresh air. The wind had died down, the blizzard had ceased, and the sky was extraordinarily clear, as if it had been polished by the storm, and studded with twinkling stars. And like the stars, brilliant and dazzling, gleamed the freshly piled drifts of snow.

"There's still a long war ahead of us!" remarked someone, puffing at a cigarette in the dark hall.

At that time the front line was somewhere near Gzhatsk, and we were then on the very tip of the attacking spearhead which was still storming Velikiye Luki. After a brief silence another voice said meditatively:

"I wonder where and when we'll dance around our first peacetime tree."

And it so happened that we had our first peacetime Christmas tree thousands of kilometres away from the little village of Novo-Bridino in the Kalinin district, had it in the

demolished, dead German city of Nuremberg, in the Press Camp's marble drawing room. And although a Negro band zoomed in the next room, although the polished floors shook with the shuffling feet of dancing couples of all nationalities, although the innumerable wines, gins, whiskeys and cognacs on the bar-room shelves sparkled in the electric light, although the barmen in American army uniforms tirelessly mixed the strangest cocktails, still that little impromptu tree, brightening the weary lives of us soldiers during those dark days, was a hundred times dearer to us than this cold, alien ball on an alien holiday.

But the dearest, highest reward for having travelled the long and difficult road of war, were the visions we cherished of our first New Year's Eve celebration in Moscow with our families, for we were then preparing to fly home from Nuremberg to our beloved native land.

Moscow, May 25, 1947.



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